Big Tech And Media Sustainability

A Resource Guide for African Media

associated with UNISA

unesco

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BIG TECH AND MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR AFRICAN MEDIA

IGD with the support of UNESCO 2025

Foreword from the Communication and Information Sector of the UNESCO Regional Office for Southern Africa

UNESCO's mission is to contribute to building a culture of peace, eradicating poverty, promoting sustainable development and fostering intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture and communication .

UNESCO is pleased to support *Big Tech and Media Sustainability. A Resource Guide for African Media*. Our support is deeply rooted in our mandate to advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental and key pillars in building inclusive knowledge societies.

This guide is a testimony to how UNESCO's mandate on freedom of expression and access to information is even more relevant today than it was when UNESCO's Constitution was adopted in 1945. UNESCO's Constitution calls on Member States to promote the free flow of ideas by word and image. The mandate recognises freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental human rights, as enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Fast forward to 2025: Southern Africa is faced with myriad opportunities and challenges brought forth by advancements in digital communication. These developments have the prospect of strengthening access to information and knowledge but carry many risks.

Media is not immune, with digital platforms shaking up the industry through the advent of new business and revenue generation models.

Such models also impact media pluralism and content diversity as the core of a healthy, democratic media landscape that promotes information as a public good.

The importance of information as a public good is further iterated in the 2021 Windhoek +30 Declaration which acknowledges the far-reaching transformational capacity of the information ecosystem, in particular the enormous role played by the Internet and digital platforms in facilitating the sharing of knowledge.

The Declaration specifically called on Big Tech to support information as a public good in various ways, especially through fair and inclusive partnership arrangements, financial relief and media viability measures.

The Declaration also called specifically on UNESCO to reinforce its cooperation with governments and civil society organisations, to safeguard and enhance guarantees for the full exercise of the right to information and freedom of expression, both online and offline, with a particular focus on strengthening media freedom, pluralism and independence, as well as media viability and transparency by digital platforms.

UNESCO Member States are reminded by the Declaration to create positive and enabling environments for freedom of expression and access to information, online and offline, in line with international guarantees and to ensure equitable funding flows to the media.

UNESCO's support for this guide is complementary, rooted in the Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms which call for shared responsibilities in the cultivation of an Internet of trust. This, to safeguard freedom of expression and access to information through a multi-stakeholder approach, which includes addressing the role of Big Tech and the need for its transparency.

In this context, UNESCO is pleased to have collaborated with the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) and other media stakeholders in South and southern Africa in developing this groundbreaking guide. We believe it will contribute to strengthening capacity for negotiating and contribute to the growth of a sustainable and inclusive media business and revenue generation models.

We also believe this guide will provide independent and community media and creatives in the digital economy with resources and tools to help them navigate the complexities of negotiating with Big Tech and local regulators in advocating for media viability in southern Africa and beyond.

associated with

The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank based at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria. It advances balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa and Africa's global politics and diplomacy. It strives to promote a broader understanding of the role of foreign policy and diplomacy in the pursuit of national and international development, and human rights and gender equity for Africa and the developing South.

Digital Society 4 Development - a vibrant programme that conducts research and advocacy in the field of ICT and the emerging 4th Industrial Revolution for Development (4IR) digital economy, AI ethics, digital justice, digital diplomacy and trade policy – further broadens public, community, labour, gender and youth perspectives and voices in this important debate which will impact on the industrial, economic, political and social life of citizens in the Global South in the decades ahead.

To this end, the IGD published the groundbreaking *4IR and the Future of Work in South Africa* (UNISA Press, 2023).

The IGD is also a co-lead for the T20 (https://t20southafrica.org) in this historical year for the African continent. Through research and collaborative initiatives, the T20 offers intellectual support and drives progress on critical issues like climate change, economic inequality and sustainable development.

Since its establishment in 2012, the T20 has been widely regarded as the 'ideas bank' of the G20, which Members support by:

- Driving idea generation and intellectual input into the G20 agenda under each presidency
- Providing evidence-based recommendations to the G20 in the form of policy briefings
- Facilitating interactions between the T20, the international think tank and research community and the broader public on global governance challenges

As the increasingly globalised digital economy becomes more concentrated and complex, it amplifies, rather than drives, socio-economic inequality within and between countries.

The United Nations Pact of the Future's Global Digital Compact, UNESCO's Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms and the Paris AI Safety Summit 2025 have developed overall guidelines towards an equitable and safe digital society.

Africa's first G20 Presidency in South Africa presents a strategic opportunity to develop a truly transformative digital agenda that creates public and social value, enhances local private value creation and kickstarts progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The T20 task force on digital transformation asks: How can we transform the digital and data economy to redress the digital inequality reflected in the uneven distribution of harms and opportunities associated with advanced data-driven technologies, to build a shared vision of the future that enables equitable, inclusive, just and sustainable development?

We thank all the relevant stakeholders who have collaborated on this journey through our workshops. These include the Press Council of South Africa, the Media Institute of Southern Africa, the T20, the South African National Editors' Forum, the National Community Radio Forum, *Isolezwe*, the Association of Independent Publishers, the Freedom of Expression Institute, the University of Johannesburg, the GIBS Media Leadership Think Tank and the Wits Centre for Journalism.

We thank all our authors for their well-considered contributions. A special thanks to Janet Smith and Izak Minnaar for valuable editing and content support.

Africa's quest for an equitable and just digital society is in our hands.

Leave no one behind!

Ashraf Patel,

Dr Philani Mthembu

Institute for Global Dialogue, associated with UNISA

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Adtech – technologies used for digital advertising; describes the software, tools and systems that enable the buying and selling of digital advertising

AI (Artificial Intelligence) – machines simulating human intelligence in digital systems

Algorithms – a set of rules for data processing, central to digital platforms

Audience – the total number of reported individuals exposed to any given media platform, often referred to as listenership (radio), viewership (TV) or readership (publication); usually forms the basis for the pricing of advertisements sold by commercial media

Automation – use of technology to perform tasks without human input

Disinformation – false information spread deliberately online

Intermediary – entity that facilitates digital interactions (e.g., search engines, social media)

Interoperability – ability of systems to work together across platforms

Large Digital Platforms – a broad category encompassing any online platform that facilitates interactions between users, such as social media, e-commerce sites or online marketplaces

Large Language Models (LLMs) – AI models, specifically neural networks, trained on vast amounts of text data to understand and generate human language

Link tax legislation – this would generally require large digital companies like Google and Meta to pay a fee to journalism outlets for the privilege of showing or linking to news content on their platforms

Media frequency – the number of times, on average, that a person within the target market is supposed to have been exposed to the advertiser's message

Media planning – a specific and detailed process of reaching the right number of appropriate people (reach), the right number of times (frequency), in the right environment at minimum cost, to achieve a brand's marketing objectives

Media reach – the number of households or people in a target market exposed to an advertising message at least once

Moderation – regulation of online content by platforms

Monetisation – turning digital activity into revenue

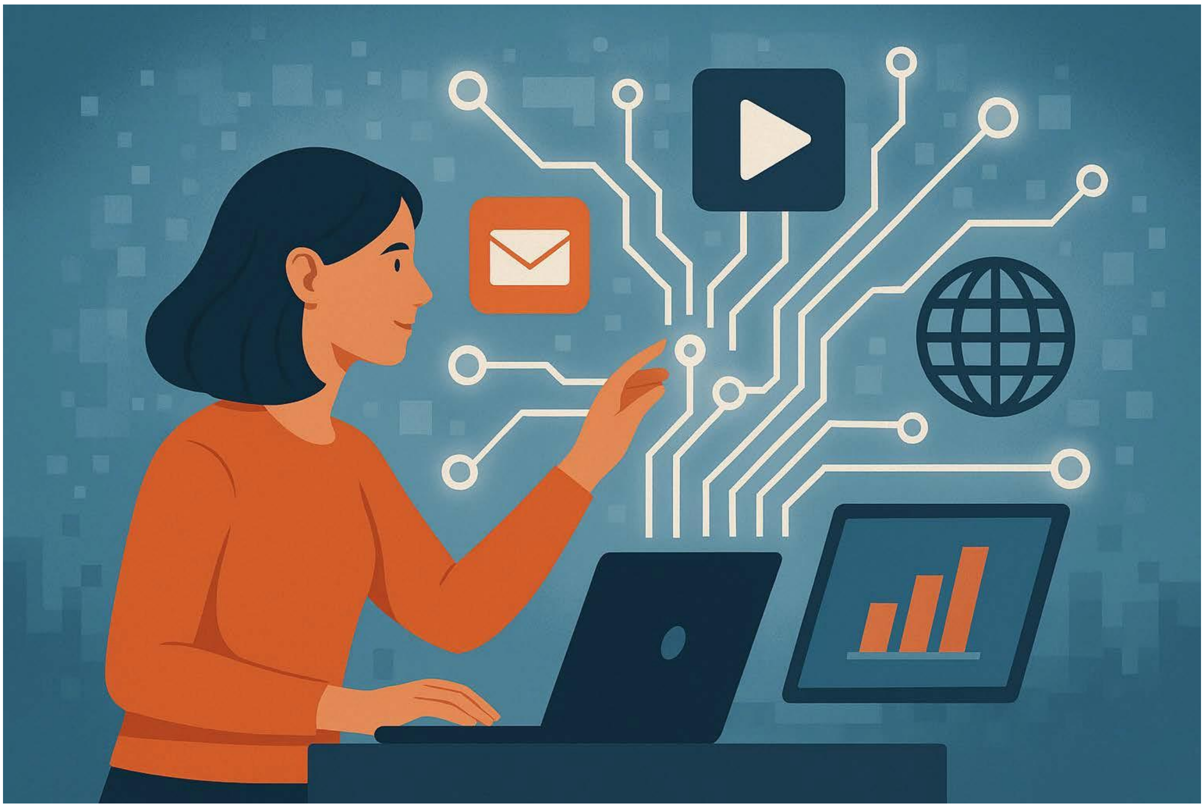
New Media – the term ‘old media’ is often used in contrast to ‘new media’ which refers to digital and online platforms like websites, blogs, social media and streaming services

Platform – a digital service enabling user interaction (e.g., Facebook, Google)

Regulation – legal oversight of digital markets and platforms

Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) – these are specifically defined in the European Union, at least, as online platforms with an average monthly active user base of at least 45 million

Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs) – refer to search engines with massive reach, at least 45 million monthly active users, and consequent impact



AI-Generated Image

The Impact of Large Digital Platforms on Media: How to create a sustainable media ecosystem

Professor Ingrid Schneider, Ashraf Patel, Tuhinsubhra Giri, Serusha Govender and Dandy Rafitrandi

The authors are experts in digital policy and transformation and were participants in the Managing Global Governance (MGG) programme of IDOS (the German Institute of Development and Sustainability) Germany in 2024.

Policy Brief

Executive Summary

The rise of Very Large Digital Platforms, encompassing dominant search engines, social networks, video platforms and messenger services, has dramatically altered the media industry, resulting in significant economic, social and democratic challenges. While these platforms offer broad accessibility to information for users, they also present significant challenges to the sustainability and integrity of traditional media.

This policy brief explores these challenges, including the diversion of advertising revenues, exploitation of data from the Global South and the Global North, tax avoidance schemes and the unregulated use of media content by generative AI, which has created serious copyright issues.

Policymakers are called upon to address these issues through comprehensive regulations and collective compensation schemes to ensure a sustainable and democratic media environment. We recommend creating a national compensation fund for collective bargaining with large digital platforms, and redistribution schemes for smaller and local media.

This policy brief outlines critical solutions and recommendations, emphasising the need for fair national compensation frameworks, enhanced copyright protections and sustainable funding models for journalism.

It aims to inform UNESCO, governmental oversight agencies, the G20 digital economy working group, national Competition Commissions and media regulatory authorities, urging them to mitigate the adverse effects of large digital platforms on the media industry and support a healthy media ecosystem.

1. Introduction

Large digital platforms have radically altered the way new information is distributed and consumed. Their dominance has raised concerns about the financial viability of traditional media, the concentration of market power and the implications for democratic processes.

Some jurisdictions are making substantial efforts to prevent or tackle these problematic impacts, but the global nature of digital platforms means that unilateral action by any single territory is unlikely to be sufficient. This policy brief suggests solutions to protect journalism integrity and ensure a balanced digital media ecosystem.

We normatively refer to the UNESCO Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms (UNESCO, 2023) which outline a set of duties, responsibilities and roles for States, digital platforms, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, media, academia, the technical community and other stakeholders to enable an environment where freedom of expression and information form the core of processes.

According to the Guidelines, digital platforms should comply with five key principles:

1. Human rights due diligence

2. Adherence to international human rights standards, including in design, content moderation and content curation

3. Transparency

4. The accessibility of available information, and

5. Accountability to relevant stakeholders

First, we analyse the major challenges. Policy recommendations are elaborated in the second part.

2. Major challenges for a healthy media ecosystem

2.1. Decline in advertising revenue and fragmentation of audience

Traditional media, including newspapers, radio and television, have historically relied on subscriptions and/or advertising revenues to fund their operations. However, the advent and subsequent dominance of large digital platforms has significantly altered this model, threatening the integrity and sustainability of the media by disrupting traditional revenue models and advertising streams, concentrating control over information dissemination and often prioritising sensational content over quality journalism (Reuters, 2023).

This shift, triggered by an AdTech model employed by dominant digital platforms, has resulted in a substantial decline in revenue for traditional media outlets, leading to budget cuts, staff layoffs, and in some cases, the closure of media organisations. These changes not only threaten the financial viability of media but also undermine their ability to produce quality journalism.

The fragmentation of media audiences further exacerbates the financial challenges faced by traditional media.

As users increasingly consume news and entertainment through digital platforms, media outlets must share their audience, leading to reduced user engagement and loyalty. This fragmentation diminishes the ability of traditional media to attract and retain subscribers and advertisers, further eroding their revenue base.

Traditional media has suffered sharp declines in traffic from social media.

Moreover, rapid advances in Generative Artificial Intelligence (generative AI) may induce AI-driven search interfaces and chatbots that could further reduce traffic flows to news websites and apps. This creates deeper uncertainty about how information environments might develop in the future. (Reuters, 2024)

2.2. Data extraction, tax avoidance and unfair revenue allocation

Large digital platforms extract vast amounts of data and profits from countries both in the Global North and the Global South without contributing fairly to local economies.

By leveraging media content, dominant digital platforms amass significant advertising revenue without equitably compensating the content creators. This revenue imbalance strains the financial sustainability and editorial independence of journalism and media houses.

Moreover, these platforms often employ sophisticated tax avoidance schemes, minimising their tax liabilities and depriving governments of critical revenue that could bolster public goods, including journalism, which further exacerbates these issues.

Many of these platforms do not maintain a physical presence or representative in all the countries where they offer their services. This is particularly so in countries of the Global South, making it difficult for local authorities to address grievances and enforce regulations.

2.3. Intellectual property issues with generative AI and copyright infringements

Generative AI technologies and LLMs, which rely on vast datasets for training, often use media archives and current news content without proper consent or compensation. This practice raises serious copyright concerns and further diminishes the revenues of media organisations.

The practise of rampant appropriation of media archives and social media content posted by users without previous consent or compensation constitutes a profound infringement of copyright laws, undermining the economic prerogatives of content creators.

Lawsuits such as The *New York Times* v. Google seek to address these imbalances (Pasquale & Haochen, 2024). The Danish Press Publications' Collective Management Organisation (DPCMO) attempts to force OpenAI to negotiate with it as a collective, and demands compensation from OpenAI for using its content to train AI models (Meaker, 2024)

2.4. Algorithmic opacity and concentration of power

Algorithms play a significant role in shaping news content on social media platforms by influencing content creation and creating echo chambers: As the platforms' goal is to maximise engagement and keep users long enough on sites to click on ads, sensational or emotionally charged news is emphasised.

Platforms' filtering and ranking of news content impact on the dissemination of important information and the prominence of credible sources. In addition, the opaque algorithms employed by digital platforms for curating news can propagate biased information dissemination, skew public perception and impede informed discourse.

When trained on data mainly from the United States and without adequate representation from minorities, AI-based algorithms will exacerbate biases and perpetuate social inequalities, particularly against content from the Global South. Furthermore, some large digital platforms exploit their dominant market position and threaten to withdraw services or cease news-related functionalities – a tactic disrupting public interaction and stifling innovation (News Media Alliance, 2022; Lindeman, 2023).

2.5. Impact on media and democracy

The consequences of these shifts are far-reaching and deeply concerning. The decline in advertising revenues and subscriptions leads to the defunding of media organisations, resulting in reduced journalistic capacity.

This erosion of the Fourth Estate downgrades the quality of democracy, as a well-informed public is essential for a pluralistic and functioning democracy. Furthermore, the unregulated use of AI by scraping news content without compensation undermines the financial stability of media organisations and exacerbates the bias and opacity issues within AI systems.

The attention economy and shifting user behaviours favour digital media consumption, thus diverting attention away from traditional media. This shift affects the effectiveness of advertisements in newspapers, radio and television, further straining the revenue streams of traditional media organisations.

Policymakers must recognise that quality journalism cannot be sustained for free and requires robust support mechanisms.

3. Solutions

3.1. Media must be considered a public good

Addressing these complex challenges necessitates conceptualising media not merely as a revenue-generating sector but as an essential public good. A robust media ecosystem underpins democracy and informed citizenship, necessitating protective measures to ensure its health and longevity.

Further, as a cornerstone of democracy, a critical role of the media is to act as a watchdog, holding power to account and fostering public debate. As a public good, the media produces benefits that extend well beyond individual consumers by contributing to societal welfare, political stability and an informed citizenship (Gulyás & Hammer, 2013).

3.2. Establish fair revenue sharing through a national media compensation fund

A comprehensive fair compensation scheme is essential for the survival of a sustainable media ecosystem. Large digital platforms must contribute an adequate percentage of their revenues to news media content creators. This should be facilitated through a national media compensation fund which pools revenues from platforms and distributes them to media organisations.

What constitutes fair compensation?

Compensation should be proportional to the value derived from the contribution. This means that larger platforms, or companies that derive more value from user data, content, or service use, should pay more. It should also be transparent, with clear metrics and formulas that stakeholders can understand and verify.

Finally, a compensation model should be sustainable, allowing platforms and contributors to maintain their operations and continue contributing to the ecosystem over the long term.

The national government should establish such a national media compensation fund and force Very Large Digital Platforms to contribute a portion of their revenues to it

Holder *et al* (2023) propose a metrics-based approach to determine fair compensation. Their analysis suggests that contributions could be based on a combination of the platform's annual advertising revenue, the volume and value of news content used, and engagement metrics such as user interaction with news content (user impressions). This compensation model is based on a fair division between platforms and publishers, and could be adjusted periodically (e.g., every three years) to reflect changes in the market, technological advancements and shifts in user behaviour.

To ensure a fair distribution of funds, a compensation fund should not only distribute according to numbers of users or impressions but also dedicate a certain distribution share for small and community-based media outlets, particularly those serving rural areas and publishing in vernacular languages. This redistribution mechanism can help to address disparities in media funding and promote diversity in content creation.

Such a fair compensation scheme would ensure a healthier media ecosystem that is vital for democracy. However, a government should act at arms' length to such a fund's governance to preserve media freedom. Thus, such a compensation fund should be administered by an independent regulatory body or agency to assure transparency and accountability.

A multi-stakeholder advisory board, ideally representing the media industry, academics and civil society organisations, should advise such a fund to make recommendations and safeguard plurality. Such a board should be expected to ensure that the interests of small and community-based media outlets are adequately represented.

A government cannot interfere in its management, to maintain transparency and accountability, and to prevent corruption or capture (see the list below, and the Annex for a table of national measures).

We propose the establishment of such a national fair compensation fund based on best practices and lessons learned from states which have managed to rein in the power of large digital platforms:

Australia counts as a successful model, as it introduced a News Media Bargaining Code which mandates negotiations between digital platforms and news media for fair compensation in 2021.

If negotiations fail, a binding arbitration process should ensure a fair outcome.

This model has resulted in significant financial agreements between platforms such as Meta and Google and news organisations. Australian media outlets have until now received more than $133 million annually from Big Tech. However, the agreements are confidential and benefit large media corporations disproportionally to small media outlets (Australia Government, 2021; NMBC, 2021; Leaver, 2021).

France's Autorité de la Concurrence fined Google €500m and €250m for non-compliance with some of its commitments in the implementation of the European Union's Copyright Directive. It obliged Google to enter negotiations with press publishers to establish remuneration for the use of their contents protected by the so-called ‘related right’ for those publishers (Debroux, 2024).

Some of the key violations by Google (fined €250m in France, March 2024)	
Failure to cooperate with monitoring trustee ▪ Google did not fully comply with its commitment to cooperate with the independent monitoring trustee overseeing its obligations. Google failed to provide the necessary information and support	Non-compliance with good-faith negotiation commitments ▪ Google failed to comply with Commitment 1, which required it to negotiate in good faith based on transparent, objective and non-discriminatory criteria with press agencies and publishers to ensure fair discussions
Lack of transparency in revenue sharing ▪ Google's commitments lacked consistency, as no connection was found between the negotiation documents and the remuneration offers. The methodology note, Data Report and explanatory appendix were not aligned in their calculation components. Google significantly restricted communication data on revenues generated from protected content queries, hindering the assessment of indirect revenues	AI and related rights: Google's transparency breach • Google’s AI service, Bard (now Gemini), used press publishers’ content in its model training and responses without informing the publishers or the Autorité. Additionally, until September 2023, press agencies had no direct way to opt out of AI usage without blocking their content from all Google services

Source: https://www.autoritedelaconcurrence.fr/en/press-release/related-rights-autorite-fines-google-eu250-million-non-compliance-some-its

Canada's Online News Act (Bill C-18 of 2023) also aims to improve journalistic sustainability by requiring digital intermediaries in an ‘asymmetrical position’ to negotiate with news publishers to compensate them for reproducing or facilitating access to their content via their platforms.

Google and Meta were vehemently opposed to this and temporarily blocked all news – even about such emergencies as acute forest fires – on their sites (Lindeman, 2023).

Indonesia promulgated Presidential Decree 32/2024, ‘On the Responsibility of Digital Platform Companies to Support Quality Journalism’, in February 2024. This decree obliges digital platforms to maintain a healthy ecosystem of news companies through various mechanisms, e.g. better visibility, paid licences, revenue sharing and sharing aggregated data from news users (Article 7(2)).

In August 2024, a committee was established by the Indonesian Press Council which published draft guidelines for the implementation of the decree on 20 January 2025 (Perpres, 2024).

South Africa's Competition Commission conducted a most comprehensive investigation into how digital platforms impact local media ecosystems. In its provisional report in February 2025 on the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry (MDPMI), the inquiry connected digital market power to constitutional rights and media diversity.

The Commission's provisional remedies request Google to provide annual payments of between R300- to R500m to news media organisations as direct compensation. Moreover, digital platforms should implement algorithmic fairness measures to ensure South African media outlets, especially in vernacular languages, are not disadvantaged compared to foreign sources.

YouTube was called to substantially increase its revenue-sharing model for news content from the current 55% to a minimum of 70%. Additionally, YouTube and Meta's in-stream videos should extend their monetisation programmes to include all eligible South African news publishers. The final report was expected by August 2025 (CCSA, 2025).

Another model employed to secure compensation and revenue is that of digital taxes. These are imposed on digital platforms based on their earnings or profits from digital activities, to ensure that digital companies contribute fairly to the economies in which they are active.

Many digital firms pay little or no traditional corporate tax due to their international operations and profit-shifting strategies. To date, 35 countries have passed legislation requiring direct taxes from large digital platforms (KPMG, 2025). The main reasons for these impositions are to ensure fair taxation, prevent tax base erosion and capture revenue from digital activities that have often been underserved by traditional tax systems.

In December 2024, Kenya published a Tax Laws (Amendment) Act that subjects non-resident digital service providers to the same excise duty obligations as local providers. This excise duty, set at 15 percent, now applies to various digital services.

Argentina implemented a 21% VAT rate on digital services provided by non-resident suppliers. Vietnam, Türkiye and the Philippines enacted legislation imposing a Value Added Tax (VAT) or sales tax on online transactions (KPMG, 2025). These digital taxes go to the state budget and are not directly related to media. However, they could partly be used for funding of national media by the state.

These examples show that some states have started to rebalance power asymmetries in the digital arena to support a sustainable national media system. Moreover, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) agreement on a 15% global minimum effective corporate tax for large multinational enterprises (MNEs) could counteract the tax avoidance strategies of digital platforms and thus ensure these entities make fair contributions to the national economies where they operate.

Such taxes should enter the national budget and allow the state to support quality journalism.

A national compensation fund, as proposed by us, is not a substitute. It’s a genuine trade-off to rebalance the extractive nature of digital platforms’ use of media content.

3.4. Preconditions for establishing a fair compensation fund

Reliable and transparent metrics must be developed to establish which digital platforms should be included and obliged to contribute to a national fair compensation fund. These include criteria for Very Large Digital Platforms, legal reforms to platform liability and clear definitions of what constitutes ‘news content’.

3.4.1. Criteria for Very Large Digital Platforms

Policymakers can draw lessons and inspiration from existing frameworks like the EU's Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA) to define VLOPs and gatekeepers (Table 1).

These frameworks are helpful to identify and regulate companies with high market power, the intention being to promote fair competition and protect smaller competitors and consumers from unfair practices. In addition, these definitions provide clear and measurable criteria which bring legal certainty for companies.

Moreover, policymakers should consider the indirect effects on innovation and competition across the ecosystem as one of possible metrics in the future.

Photo by Mos design, Unsplash

Table 1: Definition of Very Large Digital Platforms and gatekeepers in the EU

EU regulation	Annual turnover	Active users	Economic and social impact	Entrenchment and durability
'Gatekeepers' - Digital Markets Act (DMA)	At least €6.5 billion in the last three financial years or a market valuation of at least €65bnin the last financial year	At least 45 million monthly active end users (equals 10% of the inhabitants of the EU) and 10 000 yearly active business users established or located in the EU		The thresholds have been met in each of the last three financial years
VLOPs/ VLOSEs - Digital Services Act (DSA)		Platforms with more than 45 million monthly active users in the EU	Must have a significant societal and economic impact.	

Source: The EU DMA and DSA

3.4.2. Legal reforms concerning platform liability and algorithmic transparency

Changes regarding the legal nature of digital platforms are also needed. For example, Section 230 of the Communications Act in the US generally provides immunity for 'online computer services ‘with respect to third-party content generated by its users and thus conceptualises digital platforms as neutral intermediators.

However, in our opinion, platforms must take responsibility for the curation of content – for instance, the ranking of entries and timelines – and for deleting illegal and harmful content. Here, more transparency and action are needed which go beyond existing community guidelines.

Clear directives on algorithmic transparency are essential. Platforms should be mandated to disclose the criteria they use for ranking and curating news content. Regular audits and transparency requirements would mitigate the dissemination of biased information and ensure that content dissemination is fair and equitable.

In this way, platforms must also deal with election disinformation by malicious actors and define standards to counteract undue interferences.

However, censorship by the platform – or the state – must not be allowed, to safeguard free speech and a plurality of opinions.

3.4.3. Define what constitutes ‘news content’

Search engines like Google News aggregate headlines and snippets from news sites, exposing users to this content but directing significant web traffic away from the original sources, which in turn lead to a reduction in online readership and advertising revenue for news publishers (Reuters, 2024; WEF, 2020).

In addition, search and social media platforms scrape extensive portions of text and images of news articles, most often without permission, exploiting this aggregated content to train algorithms and extract business value without compensating publishers in turn.

In some cases, some search engines scan news sites in real-time, scraping articles immediately after publication, and feature headlines or snippets before publishers can put a paywall on their digital editions, thereby effectively ‘sharing journalism resources’ without paying to produce them (News-Media Alliance, 2022).

While platforms have claimed the ’fair use doctrine‘ in some copyright laws as a defence, critics have argued that this scraping of articles immediately after publication expands far beyond its role as a search engine and detrimentally denies publishers control over monetisation of their copyrighted content (Digital Content Next, 2024).

A closer look shows that Google News displays snippets averaging around seven words from each individual news article, aggregating billions of clicks monthly from major articles without direct compensation to the publishers. Similarly, an analysis of Meta showed it shared snippets from eight to 10 articles per publisher per day without fair compensation for use of copyrighted content.

For a large publisher, this can exceed 300 snippets daily (or more than one million per year) without compensation (News Media Alliance, 2022).

Further, many digital platforms cache full news articles which display most or even all the content in image previews and 'accidental full view' instances which are otherwise often behind paywalls. It's estimated that this combined scraping and aggregating has reduced global online news traffic by an estimated 2.5 billion monthly clicks worth more than $2 billion annually in lost revenue for publishers (Reuters Digital News Report, 2024).

Therefore, some countries have called for large search engines to pay a 'link tax'.

In its defence, Google, as the dominant search engine, has argued that, for instance in South Africa, news makes up only 2 to 3% of its search queries (Google Competition Commission submission, 2024). Here, a clear definition of what makes 'news content' is necessary. It can be argued that even if news were to make up only a small part of search queries, it contributes substantially to the attractiveness of a search engine, as users are expecting frequently fresh content and breaking news.

Headlines and snippets of news articles and pictures also contribute to the attention afforded search engines and social media.

Social networks like Meta have argued that they do not take up news at all anymore. Nevertheless, news is included by the users themselves, and thus, news enters feeds and timelines. It should also be considered that in the past, news content was instrumental to make social networking platforms thrive and become dominant. It therefore becomes critically important to define 'news media' as it pertains to this debate.

'Media', more broadly, refers to the diverse ecosystem of entities and individuals engaged in the production, dissemination and interpretation of news and information. This includes traditional journalism, digital content creators, social media influencers and 'citizen journalists'.

For 'media' to be designated 'news content', it needs to meet further criteria, notably:

- to have the intention to inform
- to agree to adhere to the ethical and professional standards of journalism
- to wish to influence the public discourse, and
- to have the intention to contribute to the public's knowledge

Additionally, media organisations require independent content producers to meet certain criteria to be considered 'news content':

- content needs to be accurate and reliable
- content must be fact-checked and sourced from credible information
- content must be objective and impartial using the principles of balanced reporting to present multiple fair viewpoints and avoid bias, and
- content should be timely and relevant addressing current events or emerging issues

Media organisations require independent content producers to meet certain criteria for their output to be considered 'news', too:

- it must be accurate and reliable
- it must be fact-checked and sourced from credible information
- it must be objective and impartial, using the principles of balanced reporting to present multiple fair viewpoints
- it must avoid bias, and
- it should be timely and relevant, addressing current events or emerging issues

Critically, content should be in the public interest and adhere to the further ethical standards of journalism by minimising harm and respecting privacy.

This kind of content is most often produced by individuals with formal training in journalism who adhere to standards of the profession such as that enunciated in a code of conduct. A good example would be the Code of Ethics and Conduct for South African Print and Online Media (the Press Code) (PCSA).

A definition of 'news media' is critical as it would establish which entities qualify for protections and rights, and acknowledge copyright and fair compensation. It would also ensure that AI systems handling media content respect journalistic integrity and adequately endeavour to mitigate mis- and disinformation (Gulyás & Hammer, 2013*)*.

3.4.4. Address power asymmetries by incentives and penalties

Large digital platforms have significant power advantages compared to media organisations both big and small. Such platforms can lobby governments and important institutions and threaten to exit a country or deny foreign investment.

Digital platforms want access to the greatest number of markets, especially in the Global South, where billions of users are located. Therefore, it is necessary – and possible – to counter these power imbalances using regulatory measures. Government intervention is required to ensure that social media pay appropriate amounts for their use of information and to redress the imbalances of market power.

A balanced regulatory framework that incorporates both incentives and penalties would encourage cooperation from large digital platforms. A carrot-and-stick approach should include incentives for revenue sharing and fines for non-compliance and abuse of dominance. Policymakers should ensure that these measures are effectively enforced to promote fair competition and protect the interests of media organisations.

3.4.5. Strengthen copyright laws

Intellectual property rules are policy measures designed to provide incentives to produce knowledge and innovation. Whether states allow for a 'fair use' exception in copyright is a political decision.

The advent of LLMs and generative AI has the potential to further disrupt a healthy media ecosystem, as some journalistic and creative work can be performed by AI, thus reducing the quality and ethical dimension of media and the Fourth Estate.

Considering the aggressive content scraping for gaining AI training data, it is paramount not to allow search engines and social media to get away with not paying compensation under the ruse of 'fair use' or broad exceptions for text and data mining. Compensation for news content is especially essential for the sustainability of news media at local level (Schiffrin et al, 2022).

Enhancing appropriate copyright protections is imperative to prevent unauthorised content scraping and usage by digital platforms and AI companies. These protections should make clear that IP ownership remains with the original content creators.

New and strengthened regulations should ensure that large digital platforms cannot simply exploit media archives without proper compensation, thereby protecting the economic interests of content creators and sustaining quality journalism.

Collective compensation agreements are necessary because individual bargaining between a news organisation and a dominant platform encounters complex challenges. Large publishers have advantages in signing contracts with digital platforms about licensing of content for AI purposes as compared to small media entities.

The competitive nature of the news-media industry, varying ideological perspectives and limited communication among publishers create additional barriers for cooperation and collective agreements.

Due to the entrenched dependency on platforms, some publishers have prioritised maintaining a positive relationship with platforms over the collective goal of ensuring that all news publishers receive fair compensation. Without representation and collective bargaining power, smaller entities lack the capacity to achieve equitable compensation.

Hence, it is necessary for the state to step in and assure collective copyright bargaining mechanisms. Here again, a national compensation fund will play a decisive role for collective rights representation, to incentivise dominant digital platforms to share parts of their revenues. This is how a new social contract – and sustainability – could be established in the media sector.

3.4.6. Explore alternative funding models for journalism

Diversifying funding sources for journalism is another significant step to counter the decline in media quantity and quality. Fair revenue sharing from the large digital platforms via a national compensation fund is necessary, but there must be further measures to avoid creating structural dependencies.

Alternative models such as crowdfunding, optional donations, grants from foundations, subscription fees, paywalls and even state funding (with suitable safeguards against undue influence) are critical for ensuring the financial stability of media outlets. Media bodies could also consider adopting nonprofit status which would entitle them to tax exemptions and, in some cases, eligibility for foundation-based or individual donations.

Case studies from around the world offer examples of the deployment of some of these models.

AI-Generated Image

Box 1: Alternative funding models for journalistic sustainability

Public funding/subsidies: Governments can provide direct financial support through grants and tax incentives which helps to maintain media independence and ensures that diverse content is available to the public	**Example:** The BBC is publicly subsidised by television licensing fees to deliver unbiased news without commercial pressures. An additional option is household levies for public broadcasting, as is the case in many European countries (Deane, 2021) **Challenges:** There is an increased risk of government influence or pressure on editorial independence. Reporters Without Borders emphasises maintaining a firewall between government funding and editorial content to ensure unbiased reporting
Foundation support: Philanthropic organisations support watchdog journalism by funding NGOs and non-profits dedicated to investigative projects which can help to ensure critical reporting on issues such as corruption and human rights	**Example:** The Texas Tribune launched as a nonprofit funded through philanthropic donations and now earns most of its revenue through hosting events and conferences and by producing sponsored content **Challenges:** Relying too much on limited philanthropic funding can lead to financial instability. Foundation priorities can shift, affecting long-term funding
Diversified revenue: To reduce dependency on traditional ad revenue, media organisations pivot to diversified income streams, such as hosting events, creating specialty publications and offering consulting services. Also, the addition of media products such as podcasts and newsletters can bring in intermittent revenue boosts through subscribers, outsider sponsors or partnerships, or even consulting to supplement ad/subscription revenue	**Example:** The Financial Times organises various conferences and events, such as the 'FT Global Economic Summit', and industry-specific forums. These events not only generate significant revenue through ticket sales and sponsorships but also enhance the publication's brand visibility and authority in the financial journalism space **Challenges:** This model often requires significant resources and expertise to manage multiple revenue streams effectively. Industry reports also highlight the challenge of balancing editorial goals with commercial activities
Public Media Innovation Fund: This model involves grants specifically for startups that explore innovative platforms to engage younger audiences. This means investing in digital tools and 'new media' formats to support the development of journalism that resonates with a tech-savvy demographic, ensuring the future relevance of news media These grants could also explore philanthropy partnerships through foundations that actively collaborate with newsrooms on investigative projects addressing issues such as economic disparities and political corruption	**Example:** Google's Digital News Initiative has funded projects like automated news writing tools for local journalism, helping newsrooms innovate and reach new audiences **Challenges**: In practise, funds may not be sufficient to cover extensive development and operational costs as innovation funds are often limited, requiring startups to seek additional investment or revenue sources

Philanthropy partnerships: Direct collaboration between foundations and newsrooms can lead to in-depth investigative projects focusing on critical societal issues such as economic disparities and political corruption. By pooling resources, they enable exhaustive investigations that might otherwise be financially unfeasible	**Example:** The Guardian partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on projects exploring global health and development issues **Challenges**: There are potential conflicts between journalistic independence and donor expectations and concerns about maintaining editorial integrity when collaborating with funders on specific projects
Non-profit status: News organisations can convert, allowing them to benefit from tax exemptions and eligibility for donations	**Example:** This model, adopted by outlets like ProPublica, aligns journalism's public service mission with a sustainable financial structure, encouraging long-term viability. There is also Danwatch (Denmark), which adopted a nonprofit status as a watchdog organisation that is supported by both foundation grants and individual donors and is well-known for its impactful investigative reporting **Challenges**: Dependence on donations can lead to financial unpredictability, and nonprofits need to constantly engage donors, which can divert resources from core journalistic activities
Freemium/membership models: By offering a mix of free and premium content, media outlets can attract a broad audience while generating revenue from dedicated subscribers. Members gain access to exclusive content and benefits, creating a loyal community that values quality journalism and is willing to support it financially	**Example:** The Guardian operates a successful membership model, offering readers the option to support its journalism financially while keeping content freely accessible **Challenges:** It is often difficult to convince audiences to pay for content in a market saturated with free news. Research indicates that converting free users to paying subscribers remains a significant hurdle

Source: Research by the authors

4. Conclusion

The unchecked appropriation of news media content and advertising revenues by large digital platforms poses a significant threat to a robust media ecosystem and undermines the Fourth Estate in safeguarding democracy.

The emergence of AI and LLMs further exacerbates this imbalance, raising critical concerns about trust, reliability, accuracy and credibility of information access, all of which are crucial for citizens and the social fabric.

To mitigate the adverse impact of these large digital platforms on the media ecosystem, we recommend comprehensive strategies that include fair compensation mechanisms, enhanced copyright protections, regulatory frameworks and sustainable financial models.

Central to our proposal is the establishment of a national media compensation fund. This is informed by lessons learned and best practices. The state must take the lead in creating this fund, making it a mandatory measure. This initiative will foster collective bargaining between news organisations and digital platforms, protecting not only major media conglomerates but also smaller, local and community outlets.

While the state is critical in setting up such a fund, it is essential that it is kept at arm's length to ensure effective operations. Therefore, the fund should be managed by an independent supervisory body with a multi-stakeholder advisory board, promoting democratic oversight and equitable resource distribution.

Moreover, efforts to diversify funding sources, reinforce copyright laws, enforce algorithmic transparency and implement robust legal and tax structures are crucial to holding large digital platforms accountable.

By embracing these strategies and conforming to applicable laws and guidelines, the future of quality journalism can be secured, and its status as a pillar of democracy and human rights restored.

It is essential to raise societal awareness that credible journalism can only occur in a context of media freedom, and that it needs to be financially viable to develop. The insight that quality journalism can never be ‘for free‘ will further support the media's integrity and sustainability in the digital age.

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Annex

Examples of regulation practices for digital platforms and news media:

Country and practice	**Framework overview**	**Key features**	**Critical analysis**	**Current status**
Australia – News Media and Digital Platforms Mandatory Bargaining Code www.acma.gov.au/news-media-bargaining-code	A mandatory code requiring digital platforms to negotiate fair payment with news publishers.	Ensures fair compensation, arbitration mechanism, transparency in negotiations.	Strengthens media sustainability but raises concerns about platform retaliation and selective agreements.	Enforced since 2021, ongoing negotiations between platforms and publishers.
Brazil – Bill 2630/2020 (nicknamed 'Fake News Bill') https://www.internetsociety.org/resources/doc/2025/proposals-to-regulate-digital-platforms-in-brazil-potential-impacts-in-the-internet/	-A legislative proposal aimed at regulating digital platforms to combat misinformation and ensure accountability. -regulatory effort to assert national control over digital platforms and ensure compliance with local laws.	-Establishes content moderation rules, increases platform responsibility, enhances transparency in digital advertising. -Focuses on jurisdictional authority, transparency in platform operations, and user rights protection.	-Strengthens media integrity but raises concerns about potential government overreach and impact on free speech. -Supports digital sovereignty but risks fragmenting the global Internet and limiting cross-border platform operations	Ongoing discussions, with multiple legislative proposals under review.

Canada – Online News Act (Bill C-18) https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/news/2023/12/backgrounder-final-regulations-for-the-online-news-act.html	A law requiring large digital platforms to negotiate fair compensation with Canadian news publishers.	Establishes a bargaining framework, mandates transparency, and includes arbitration mechanisms.	Supports media sustainability but faces challenges in enforcement and platform compliance.	Enforced since June 2023, with ongoing regulatory adjustments.
Chile – National Television Council Law (NTCL)https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=f675b9a9-b059-46b6-b8ad-2dafb8abad12#:~:text=Summarise%20the%20regulatory%20framework%20for,for%20breaches%20to%20the%20law	Regulates television broadcasting, including content standards and licensing.	Oversees concessions for open television broadcasting, enforces content regulations, and applies sanctions for violations.	Ensures media accountability but lacks direct oversight of digital platforms.	Enforced, with ongoing regulatory updates.
EU – Articles 15 & 17 (Copyright Directive) https://www.leadersleague.com/en/news/european-copyright-directive-what-do-articles-15-and-17-mean	Establishes rights for press publishers and strengthens platform liability regarding copyrighted content usage.	Article 15 mandates fair revenue sharing for press publishers when digital platforms display news snippets. Article 17 requires platforms to proactively filter copyrighted content and secure licenses.	Supports content creators and media sustainability but raises concerns about automated filtering, free expression limitations, and access to news.	Implemented across EU member states, with variations in enforcement and ongoing legal challenges.
France – Loi SREN (Law to Secure and Regulate the Digital Space) https://www.twobirds.com/en/insights/2024/france/la-loi-sren-securisation-et-regulation-de-l-espace-numerique-en-france	A law strengthening digital platform regulation, ensuring user safety, and combating illegal content.	Requires platforms to enhance moderation, publish transparency reports, and remove illegal content within strict timeframes.	Improves digital security but raises concerns about enforcement and compliance by major tech firms	Enforced since May 2024, with fines imposed on non-compliant platforms like Google.

Germany – Medienstaatsvertrag (MStV) https://www.osborneclarke.com/insights/germany-new-state-treaty-media-entered-force-overview https://merlin.obs.coe.int/article/9037	A state treaty regulating digital media, ensuring fair competition and content oversight.	Covers streaming services, digital advertising, and platform liability, aligning with EU directives.	Supports media sustainability but faces challenges in adapting to evolving digital landscapes.	Implemented since 2020, with ongoing updates.
Indonesia: Regulation 32/2024	Presidential Regulation No. 32 of 2024 (PR 32/2024) is Indonesia's first formal legal framework aimed at regulating how digital platform companies support quality journalism. It covers platforms operating in Indonesia that handle the digital collection, distribution, and presentation of news. The regulation seeks to ensure that journalistic content is fairly valued, respected, and properly commercialized within digital ecosystems.	Digital platforms must prioritize licensed, legal journalism; support fair commercialization; and adjust algorithms to favor quality news. Platforms and press companies are required to formalize cooperation through agreements like paid licenses, profit-sharing, or data-sharing. An independent committee monitors compliance, issues recommendations, and helps resolve disputes through alternative dispute resolution (ADR). While obligations are laid out, the regulation does not currently include penalties or sanctions for non-compliance.	PR 32/2024 marks an important step in strengthening the media ecosystem at a time when digital platforms dominate public information flow. By focusing on cooperation and fair treatment, it aims to balance the power between tech platforms and press companies, protecting journalistic integrity and economic viability. However, its lack of enforcement mechanisms (no penalties for non-compliance) raises concerns about the actual impact on platform behavior. The reliance on voluntary cooperation and ADR, while progressive, might limit its teeth in practice. Additionally, how fairly the compliance committee operates — especially given its mixed membership and funding sources — will be crucial to its credibility.	Enacted, 2024

Italy – Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) Implementation https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2024-06-06/italy-implementation-of-eu-legislation-on-audiovisual-media-services/	Aligns Italian law with EU regulations on digital media and platform accountability.	Covers television, radio, and online media, ensuring transparency and fair competition.	Strengthens media oversight but faces challenges in adapting to evolving digital platforms.	Implemented through Legislative Decree No. 208/2021, governing audiovisual services
Japan – Act on Improving Transparency and Fairness of Digital Platforms (TFDPA) https://www.meti.go.jp/english/policy/mono_info_service/information_economy/digital_platforms/index.html	A law ensuring transparency and fairness in digital platform operations, focusing on business-to-platform interactions.	Requires digital platforms to disclose terms, ensure fair practices, and submit annual reports on compliance.	Strengthens platform accountability but has a limited scope, primarily covering app stores and online marketplaces.	Enforced since February 2021, with expanded coverage for digital advertising services in 2022.
South Africa – Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry https://techcentral.co.za/digital-giants-south-african-news-media/264431/ https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/94388_cc_mdpmi-provisional-report_non-confidential-final.pdf	A Competition Commission inquiry assessing the impact of digital platforms on news media sustainability.	Examines revenue-sharing models, algorithmic biases, and bargaining power between platforms and publishers.	Strengthens media sustainability but raises concerns about government intervention and enforcement feasibility.	Inquiry ongoing, with potential regulatory changes expected.
South Korea – Telecommunications Business Act (TBA) Amendment https://www.clearygottlieb.com/-/media/files/rostrum/south%20korea/22092308%20digital%20markets%20regulation%20handbookr16south%20korea	Regulates app store operators and digital platforms to ensure fair business practices.	Imposes obligations on app store operators, mandates transparency in pricing and data usage.	Strengthens consumer protection but faces challenges in balancing innovation and regulation.	Enforced since September 2021, with periodic updates.
United States – Journalism Competition and Preservation Act (JCPA) (Proposed) https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/press/releases/senate-judiciary-committee-advances-bipartisan-bill-to-preserve-strong-independent-journalism-and-news-organizations	A proposed bill allowing news publishers to collectively negotiate with digital platforms.	Enables collective bargaining, aims to secure fair revenue distribution.	Faces opposition from tech companies and concerns about unintended consequences.	Not yet passed, under legislative review.

Framing the fight for fairer digital markets: An interim analysis of how a journalism-led civil society alliance shaped South Africa's Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry

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Abstract

This chapter offers an interim assessment of the impact of a journalism-led civil society alliance on the MDPMI conducted by South Africa's Competition Commission.

'Journalism-led' refers to the central role played by SANEF in convening and co-ordinating this alliance. SANEF is a nonprofit supporting media freedom whose members are editors, senior journalists and journalism trainers. Thus, the terms 'journalism-led' and 'SANEF-led' are used interchangeably.

Drawing on the alliance's written and oral submissions — culminating in its response to the Commission's MDPMI Provisional Report in April 2025 — this chapter examines how the alliance helped shape the Inquiry's conceptual framing, scope and initial findings. At the time of writing, the Commission's final report had not yet been published.

It is important to clearly situate the alliance's influence on this ambitious regulatory effort to reform digital media markets in the public interest, and so it is analysed across five key areas:

- the rights-based and constitutional framing of platform harms
- critiques of algorithmic opacity and content deprioritisation
- contributions to structural remedies, including a Media Industry Fund and compensation mechanisms
- successful advocacy for the inclusion of AdTech, public broadcasting and generative AI, and
- its procedural role in enhancing the Inquiry's participatory legitimacy

Introduction

The MDPMI was initiated by the Competition Commission on 15 September 2023 under Section 43B of the Competition Act 89 of 1998 (Competition Commission, 2023c).

It marks one of the most significant regulatory responses by a Global South country to the dominance of digital platforms like Google and Meta in the media and digital advertising sectors.

At the outset, the Commission explained the inquiry was initiated because it had ‘reason to believe that there exist market features in digital platforms that distribute news media content which impede, distort or restrict competition, or undermine the purposes of the Act, and which have material implications for the news media sector of South Africa’ (Competition Commission, 2023c:1).

The Commission considered how such ‘distortions’ may undermine access to public interest journalism, media diversity and the inclusion of smaller publishers and historically disadvantaged participants (Competition Commission, 2025).

The Inquiry encouraged wide-ranging participation and called for highly specific input, as detailed in its published guidelines. This approach strengthened its legitimacy and allowed it to collect valuable market information (Competition Commission, 2023c).

After 17 months of investigation and evidence-gathering, the Inquiry’s Provisional Report produced notable findings and remedies, dealing separately with search, social media, AdTech and generative AI (Competition Commission, 2025). It identified a wide range of competitive concerns affecting the sustainability and visibility of news, including:

- the dominance of search and social platforms in directing referral traffic
- declining visibility of news on social media
- AdTech value extraction
- the lack of algorithmic transparency, and
- the unremunerated use of news content to train generative AI

The Provisional Report was distinguished not only by its suggestion of financial and structural remedies, but also by its explicit grounding in constitutional rights and democratic values. The Commission wrote that it ‘recognise[d] … the harms caused by platform conduct extend beyond competition outcomes and relate directly to the rights and values enshrined in the Constitution’ (Competition Commission, 2025: 7).

This orientation owes much to early interventions by civil society, especially SANEF. In 2021, the organisation published a discussion paper, ‘Media sustainability and access to public interest journalism: strategies and considerations' (SANEF, 2021). Developing these themes the following year, it published a position paper on the 'Sustainability of journalism and competition in the digital economy' (SANEF, 2022).

This paper laid a conceptual foundation for SANEF's approach to the MDPMI and anticipated many of the key issues – such as non-transparent algorithmic systems, unfair market design, and the need for structural and rights-based remedies – which were later investigated.

The discussion paper, the position paper and subsequent submissions by the SANEF-led alliance to the MDPMI were drafted with the assistance of public interest advisory firm ALT Advisory, whose subject matter expertise and process management were instrumental in strengthening the coalition's engagements with the Inquiry.

It is important to note that, before the alliance convened, a grouping called Publisher Support Services (PSS, previously Print and Digital Media SA or PDMSA) had made *in camera* submissions to the Competition Commission about market distortion and the erosion of advertising revenues due to dominant platform conduct. Specifically, this was about the impacts of digital advertising on news publishing businesses.

This followed the Commission's 2020 paper titled 'Competition in the Digital Economy', which detailed competition and regulatory issues in the South African digital economy and set out the Commission's intended strategic actions in relation to competition law issues. These included an intention to initiate a market inquiry (Webber Wentzel, 2021).

The Commission then established an Online Intermediation Platforms Market Inquiry (OIPMI), to which the PSS made its confidential submission which included a draft News Media and Digital Platforms Regulation Bill closely modelled on Australia's 2021 Bargaining Code.

Its founder members being the five major South African news publishers, PSS was a significant voice as it represented the biggest employers of journalists outside the public broadcaster (Publisher Support Services, 2022a).

The major publishers were:

- Independent Online SA Proprietary Limited (IOL), owned by Independent Media Group
- Media24 Proprietary Limited (Media24)
- Arena Holdings Proprietary Limited (Arena)
- CTP Limited (Caxton), and
- Mail & Guardian Online Proprietary Limited (Mail & Guardian)

The PSS would attempt to broaden its support base beyond this initial group, but such efforts were largely unsuccessful. Some smaller publishers and community-based media appeared hesitant to rally behind a campaign driven by five of the biggest news publishers.

Nonetheless, the Competition Commission inquiry process fostered an inclusive and deliberative platform which brought together a more diverse range of actors. This came to include newsroom leaders, community and vernacular media, digital rights and media advocacy organisations, a body which supported self-regulation and a policy-oriented think tank.

The Competition Commission released its OIPMI Provisional Report in July 2022 in which it took the PSS's position on legislative remedies into account but 'emphasised that digital advertising markets were outside [that] inquiry's Terms of Reference' (ToRs) and [it declined to expand the scope].

It recommended instead that such issues be addressed 'through a separate process, including potentially a more focused market inquiry' (Competition Commission, 2022a: 45).

Recognising the opportunity to shape that emerging process, SANEF formally submitted its position paper to the Commission on 15 September 2022. The submission was framed as both a strategic intervention and a resource for the Commission, which was still considering the draft terms of a new market inquiry.

The position paper provided a comprehensive overview of global regulatory responses, assessed the feasibility of competition-based reform in South Africa, and mapped out policy principles for ensuring the sustainability and independence of journalism (SANEF, 2022).

While the PSS catalysed early action, the SANEF-led alliance developed a more principled and process-aligned approach to platform accountability.

SANEF then extended an invitation to the Commissioner, or a delegate, to participate in a journalism sustainability workshop on 26 September 2022. The workshop, facilitated by former UNESCO director Professor Guy Berger, brought together editors, policymakers, scholars and civil society actors to discuss long-term funding and regulatory options.

This event further positioned SANEF as a constructive interlocutor in what would become the MDPMI.

A distinguishing feature of PSS's submissions to the new market inquiry was an emphasis on finding a valuation methodology to quantify the value of news. Their August 2024 presentation to the MDPMI outlined models including publishing cost recovery, lost profit estimates and international comparatives like the Swiss Report model[1] (Publisher Support Services, 2024).

While these efforts sought to base compensation discussions on available financial data, they also illustrated the limitations of applying static valuation formulas in the absence of transparency from platforms.

To date, the SANEF-led alliance has declined to endorse a specific or fixed news valuation model and instead called on the Commission to undertake its own research into the value of news. By 2025, the alliance had gone further – recommending reparations for anti-competitive conduct by digital platforms.

It said the Commission should 'initiate independent research to quantify the economic harm caused by platforms' anti-competitive behaviour, ensuring that any historic compensation is grounded in a rigorous assessment of actual losses' (SANEF et al., 2025a).

In any event, the Commission was 'not persuaded by the estimates of either Google … or the PSS' (Competition Commission, 2025:47). Its Provisional Report made a series of financial estimates and far-reaching recommendations on how much Google should pay to the news media annually, based on a holistic view of all the information submitted to the Inquiry, including the data submitted confidentially (Competition Commission, 2025).

While SANEF welcomed many aspects of these financial and structural remedies, it did not agree that only Google should be required to compensate journalism and the news media for anti-competitive conduct as the 'requisite justifications for compensation from the social media platforms exist' (SANEF, 2025a: 4).

Growth in membership of the SANEF-led alliance

In 2023, SANEF convened a group of civil society and media organisations to participate and respond in a coordinated fashion to the MDPMI. SANEF, the Press Council of South Africa (PCSA), the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP), Media Monitoring Africa (MMA),

[1] The 'Swiss Report model' is not referenced by PSS but it is most likely they were referring to Alexis Johann et al's 2023 paper, 'The value of journalistic content for the Google search engine in Switzerland: A behavioural economics approach to ancillary copyright' (FehrAdvice & Partners AG, an independent research consultant, on behalf of the Swiss media publishers' association). Accessible here: https://fehradvice.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2023_04_21_study_journalistic_value_google_en.pdf
At the time of finalising this chapter in June 2025, the Swiss Federal Council had submitted a draft law to Parliament proposing a new related right that would require large online service providers to remunerate media companies for the use of journalistic content snippets, with a share allocated to journalists. Accessible here: https://shorturl.at/nrKug

the SOS Support Public Broadcasting Coalition (SOS) and the Forum for Community Journalists (FCJ) jointly submitted comments on the draft ToRs (SANEF et al., 2023a).

This early formation established the alliance's strategic posture, centring public interest journalism, universal access to credible news, constitutional rights and media diversity as essential lenses through which to assess digital platform conduct.

By 14 November 2023, the alliance expanded to include the GIBS Media Leadership Think Tank, which joined as a co-signatory on the written response to the Commission's Statement of Issues (SANEF et al., 2023b).

The alliance expanded further in January 2024 when SABC News became a co-signatory to the submission on the Further Statement of Issues (SANEF et al., 2024a). Then, in April 2025, the Campaign for Free Expression (CFE), the Campaign on Digital Ethics (CODE) and online media expert Vincent Maher (as an individual signatory) joined the submission in response to the Commission's Provisional Report (SANEF et al., 2025a).

By the time the alliance submitted its formal response to the Provisional Report in April 2025, its expanded composition reflected its intent to combine newsroom leadership, editorial self-regulation, grassroots representation, policy research and digital rights advocacy.

During a period when many civil society actors lacked the resources to participate in protracted regulatory processes, the SANEF-led coalition served as a focal point for collaborative advocacy on media viability.

The Commission – which published six annexures to the Provisional Report of supporting data and analysis – reviewed a wide range of other inputs from commercial media groups, digital platforms, technical experts and individuals, notably, Google, Meta, Naspers, the PSS, Arena Holdings, *Daily Maverick*, the SABC, eMedia Investments, the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change (CABC), Berger, Maher, Professor Justine Limpitlaw, Dr Anya Schiffrin, Dr Courtney Radsch and Professor Rasmus Neilsen. [2]

Alliance impact on key issues in the Commission's Provisional Report[3]

The alliance's influence began with its input on the ToRs, where it called for the Inquiry to be interpreted in line with the constitutional values of the South African legal order –

[2] This chapter does not attempt to assess the full range of submissions to the MDPMI, or the entire evidentiary record reviewed by the Commission. Rather, it offers a thematic analysis of the SANEF-led alliance's interventions and their demonstrable impact on key issues at this stage of the inquiry.
[3] Due to space limitations, chapter provides only a limited account of all the key issues raised by SANEF. A longer assessment would include the Commission's recognition of news as a public good and how the rights of children were dealt with in the Provisional Report.

including freedom of expression, access to information and socio-economic justice – rather than only as an investigation into an economic distortion of markets.

This impact is best understood as part of a growing alignment in South Africa among public interest organisations which treats journalism not as a commercial by-product of digital markets, but as an essential democratic practice – a public good – that must be structurally supported.

Framing the market: constitutional rights, journalism and platforms

This was reinforced during the alliance's oral presentations in March 2024, which stated: 'The provision of access to credible news as a public good must be considered as a constitutional issue, not only as a matter of commercial competition' (SANEF et al., 2024b: 29).

In its January 2024 submission on the Further Statement of Issues, the alliance deepened this rights-based framing by drawing explicitly on the Constitutional Court's landmark Mediclinic decision which reinforced the view that constitutional interpretation is a duty, not a discretionary exercise:

'The invocation of section 39(2) of the Constitution in interpreting legislation … ought not to be viewed as an optional extra … it is a constitutional obligation' (Mediclinic, para 9, as cited in SANEF et al., 2024a: 14).

The Provisional Report's strong assertion of rights protection and democratic values was therefore welcomed by the alliance as a ' … shift from a narrow economic view of the competition harms' (SANEF et al., 2025a: 3).

The alliance has submitted that referral traffic suppression, non-transparent algorithmic ranking and extractive AdTech structures affected several key constitutional provisions. The alliance highlights that these harms are not accidental, but the result of deliberate platform architecture.

Its 2023 submission stated that 'freedom of expression cannot be exercised if South Africans are denied access to a diversity of local, public interest news online because algorithms do not prioritise such content, or because platforms suppress it' (SANEF et al., 2023a: 5).

The Commission's Provisional Report 'recognises that the harms caused by platform conduct extend beyond competition outcomes and relate directly to the rights and values enshrined in the Constitution' (Competition Commission, 2025: 7).

In this framing, market power is not just an economic problem. It is a democratic problem that affects whose voices are heard, what information circulates and how rights are realised in the digital space.

The alliance's submissions call on the Commission to use its powers not simply to balance revenue, but to restore public interest values in platform governance.

Invisible by design: algorithmic bias, news visibility and transparency

One of the SANEF-led alliance's most important contributions to the MDPMI process lies in its systematic critique of algorithmic design and platform opacity.

Rather than treating algorithms as neutral or inevitable, the alliance emphasised their role as deliberate expressions of corporate strategy with profound implications for local media viability and diversity of public interest content.

The alliance flagged the lack of algorithmic transparency and data access, stating that 'publishers do not know what content performs, how it ranks, or how value is extracted from it', and calling for structural remedies to correct this information asymmetry (SANEF et al., 2023a: 6).

The alliance consistently foregrounded transparency and data access as foundational requirements for a fairer digital ecosystem. These principles were advanced both as stand-alone remedies and enablers of other interventions related to algorithmic accountability, market power and fair compensation.

This emphasis was reinforced in oral testimony by Berger on behalf of SANEF during the Commission's 4 March 2024 public hearing. He urged the Commission to recognise that 'transparency is essential to verify that they are doing what they claim to be doing' and should be 'part of the costs of doing business in South Africa' (Berger, 2024: 22).

Berger argued that without enforceable transparency measures, platforms' representations of self-regulation remain unaccountable and opaque: 'The way that the platforms say they are doing quality control, and the metrics they present, are particularly configured to suit their interest and don't give you the whole picture' (Berger, 2024: 21).

In concluding his submission, he called on the Commission to adopt structural remedies grounded in transparency and systemic openness.

'A key mechanism you can use for that is to get transparency – much greater transparency and data access in all three markets.'

Berger here referred to content production, distribution and monetisation (Berger, 2024: 29). He stressed the indispensability of this approach, warning: 'No redress will be possible unless there really is transparency for accountability.'

Across multiple submissions to the MDPMI, the alliance raised sustained concerns about how platform algorithms determine news visibility online. These centred on the interlinked problems of the ranking and discoverability of news content, particularly from smaller and community publishers, and the lack of transparency and accountability when platforms change their systems in ways that disadvantage public interest journalism.

Submissions also highlighted how these design choices disproportionately affect under-resourced, vernacular-language outlets.

During SANEF's presentation at the March 2024 oral hearings, Chris Mcinga from AIP reinforced this concern, saying 'If you were to search a particular story in a vernacular language, the likelihood of that website featuring above the fold on search engines' result pages is very slim … When it comes to Google News, hardly any independent community newspaper features' (Competition Commission, 2024: 45).

The alliance also drew attention to the information asymmetries created by the lack of real-time data on news content performance.

These concerns were ultimately reflected in the Commission's Provisional Report which acknowledged the structural effects of authority signals in search: 'Smaller and local publishers may not be ranked highly in search results due to the way authority signals are calculated by search engines.[4] This affects the visibility of their content and the ability to attract audiences.' (Competition Commission, 2025: 33).

Crucially, the Commission also noted that these ranking outcomes are not inevitable but the result of discretionary platform choices. It found that 'the choices made in the design of ranking algorithms could be different and do not represent immutable constraints'.

'This suggests that the current system of content visibility is not neutral but a function of business model decisions that can be altered.' (Competition Commission, 2025: 33)

To address design-driven suppression of referral traffic, the Provisional Report recommended that Google implement search design changes aimed at increasing referrals to South African news media. Remedies include removing bias favouring foreign media and YouTube, improving discoverability of local and vernacular outlets, optimising snippet lengths to promote click-throughs and introducing a South African news filter on the search results page.

[4] Authority signals refer to the cues that algorithms, particularly those used by search engines, rely on to assess how reliable, relevant, and credible a given piece of content or website may be.

The Commission emphasised that rebuilding referral traffic is preferable to compensation through platform ad revenues, and that failure to fix structural issues could justify a permanent digital levy on advertising.

By drawing attention to the systemic invisibility created by algorithmic market design, the alliance successfully challenged the notion that platform decisions about news visibility are neutral. Instead, it framed them as policy choices with potentially far-reaching democratic consequences.

Deprioritisation of news by Meta and X

The alliance raised early and sustained concerns about the structural effects of platform-led demotion of news in social media feeds – particularly Meta's algorithmic changes from 2018 onwards, which deprioritised links to news content in favour of personal and video content.

These changes contributed to significant traffic declines for many South African publishers, particularly local and community media.

At the March 2024 public hearings, SANEF and its partners warned that such changes constituted unilateral market design by powerful platforms with no obligation to support media pluralism.

SANEF's Izak Minnaar stated: 'For some of the media houses who have for years built up an audience on Facebook, with Facebook now suddenly just deciding they are going to try and have less to do with news, it's a huge issue. They lose a huge chunk of their audience.' (Competition Commission, 2024: 50)

In the same session, this author asked the Commission: 'Surely this deprecating, de-amplifying and blocking of news is not legitimate conduct from a platform that is inarguably dominant in its respective markets and one of the largest companies in human history?' (Markovitz, 2024: slide 14)

This question was answered in the Provisional Report, which explicitly called on platforms to stop the practice of demoting news content, proposing a 'remedy to require equal algorithmic treatment to public interest news content' (Competition Commission, 2025: 94).

The alliance welcomed this recognition in its April 2025 response, adding that the proposed remedy of algorithmic non-discrimination was consistent with its own call for structural safeguards to protect visibility and access to verified news content across digital platforms.

Credible, accountable journalism and membership of self-regulatory bodies

One of the alliance's most significant and directly attributable areas of influence was on how to define credible and trustworthy media, having affirmed that 'credibility must form a central component of the MDPMI's investigations'.

'Existing and effective self-regulatory mechanisms can be leveraged in this regard: membership of either the Press Council or the BCCSA should be a criterion for measuring the credibility and, therefore, the contribution to the public interest, of news publishers.' (SANEF et al, 2023b)

The alliance therefore strongly welcomed the recommendation that credibility be defined in part by such membership, with the Commission making it clear that 'news media and broadcasters [should] predominately service the South African market, report on current issues or events of public significance for South Africans at a local, regional or national level and adhere to the regulatory oversight by the Press Council or BCCSA' (Competition Commission, 2025: 65).

The Commission went further. It not only affirmed the self-regulatory role of those bodies, but recommended they also receive annual contributions from digital platforms since their funding is at risk.

The Media Industry Fund

A Media Industry Fund represents one of the most tangible structural interventions proposed in the Provisional Report. Designed as a structural remedy rather than a subsidy, it could correct systemic imbalances in the digital advertising ecosystem and support the long-term sustainability of public interest journalism.

The alliance laid the groundwork for this before the commencement of the MDPMI. In 2021, SANEF's paper, 'Media sustainability and access to public interest journalism', recommended that a Media Sustainability Fund 'independent of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) and state oversight and control, to support, promote and strengthen public interest media organisations in South Africa, should be considered' (SANEF, 2021:26). The MDDA is a partnership between the South African government and major print and broadcasting companies to assist in developing community and small commercial media.

SANEF presciently recommended that such a fund be realised through a range of options, including 'taxes or licence fees collected from social media platforms'. This is among measures contemplated in the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies

(DCDT) Draft White Paper on Audio and Audio-visual Content Services Policy Framework (SANEF, 2021:26). [5]

In January 2024, SANEF and its partners were the first participants in the MDPMI process to formally propose a National Public Interest Media Fund 'to support [such] journalism … through a combination of public and private sources, including levies or contributions from digital platforms' (SANEF et al., 2024: 28).

This framing sets the stage for a shift in how funding journalism could be approached – not as a traditional subsidy, but to correct imbalances in the digital economy and ensure the value generated is returned to the institutions that produce it.

The Provisional Report grounded its Media Industry Fund remedy in the recognition that digital platforms extract substantial economic value from journalism through indexing, user engagement and the collection of behavioural data while returning insufficient compensation to content producers.

The Commission proposed that platforms and publishers first attempt to reach voluntary settlement agreements, but if this failed, 'a levy of between 5 to 10% on digital advertising revenue, calculated and collected by an independent agency, may be introduced to fund public interest journalism' (Competition Commission, 2025: 90).

Importantly, the Commission also warned of structural risks if disbursement mechanisms were not properly designed: 'Elsewhere [these funds] have been linked to either content volume or journalist numbers, either way favouring the large mainstream media, and at risk of undermining media diversity and plurality.'

'Some countries have offered subsidies in a manner that privileges smaller media over legacy, to improve diversity. Needs … differ materially … .' (Competition Commission, 2025: 64)

In its April 2025 response to the Provisional Report, the alliance broadly supported the Commission's proposal, while cautioning about the risk of political interference and fund

[5] The author served as Chairperson of the Expert Reference Panel that advised on the Draft White Paper on Audio and Audiovisual Content Services Policy Framework, published in Government Gazette No. 43797 on 9 October 2020 by the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies. Accessible here: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202010/43797gon1081.pdf. Five years later, the process has stalled following four changes in ministerial leadership during the same period. This has prevented South Africa from asserting regulatory jurisdiction over streaming services and major video platforms – unlike the European Union's progress through the Digital Markets Act and Digital Services Act. As SANEF noted in its 2025 submission to the Commission, a new regulatory framework could also introduce risk mitigation obligations for platforms in relation to online harm and associated content (SANEF, 2025a: 22).

capture, stressing 'independent management and adjudication … for independence from any state interference'.

'This is vital to … protect [the sector] from indirect attacks on freedom of the press or undue influence.' (SANEF et al., 2025a: 16)

The alliance rejected the idea of routing the fund through existing state institutions, stating that 'the MDDA does not provide a suitable vehicle for the Media Industry Fund due to its longstanding history of poor functioning and allegations of corruption' (SANEF et al., 2025a: 16).

The alliance identified the importance of enforceability if settlement frameworks break down. Drawing on international experience, it reiterated that non-binding obligations are often insufficient when platforms resist meaningful accountability, and recommended that the Commission be prepared to use its powers if negotiations stall (SANEF et al., 2025a: 16).

Inclusion of the public broadcaster in compensation remedies

In 2023, the alliance raised an important omission in the Commission's draft ToRs: the SABC, South Africa's public broadcaster, did not feature. The alliance wrote: 'It is extremely concerning that [there is no] mention of the SABC … in [the] Statement of Issues [as] the SABC is a source of news for millions of South Africans' (SANEF et al., 2023a: 6).

The submission argued that the SABC faced distinct and acute challenges in monetising its digital content, particularly via platforms such as YouTube, and that these challenges could not be addressed without a more inclusive Inquiry framework.

This recommendation was later reflected in the Provisional Report, which stated: 'The challenges faced by the public broadcaster … as well as other broadcasters who broadcast news, in monetising their content on digital platforms, were also highlighted in the hearings.'

'In particular, the lack of traffic to content on YouTube where the SABC earns monetisation revenue, was highlighted.' (Competition Commission, 2025: 80)

This shows a throughline between the alliance's research and advocacy and the Commission's provisional remedies.

AdTech and monetisation

On Adtech and monetisation being included in the ToRs, the alliance's submission warned that 'content-agnostic, behaviourally driven, programmatic advertising models' were privileging low-quality and harmful content while undermining the visibility and viability of credible news (SANEF et al., 2023a: 6).

'We are of the view that … AdTech, including supply-side platforms, demand-side platforms and intermediary advertising exchanges, cannot practically be excluded from the scope of the draft ToRs without compromising the MDPMI's ability to meaningfully address the current challenges in the news media market.' (SANEF et al., 2023a: 12)

The Provisional Report agreed, embedding references to international precedent and domestic applicability around Adtech into its proposed remedies. It cited existing anti-trust action by the French Competition Authority (Autorité de la Concurrence) against Google's advertising stack. '[The fact that it is entrenched] and benefit[s] from strong network effects, gave structural remedies strong appeal.' (Competition Commission, 2025 :124)

The Commission also recommended South Africa consider structural remedies adopted by the EU or US [6], and proposed domestic reforms such as ending an additional 5 to 10% fee which Google charges for third-party supply-side bids, and mandating greater data transparency from Google's ad services to news publishers (Competition Commission South Africa, 2025a: 124).

Generative AI

The alliance raised early concerns about the use of publisher content by LLMs, cautioning that 'generative AI may reproduce, summarise and provide responses based on news content without attribution or referral to original sources' (SANEF et al., 2023a: 5).

It thus proactively advocated for the inclusion of generative AI in the scope of the MDPMI in its April 2023 submission on the draft ToR, and the Commission agreed, going further by proposing targeted remedies on generative AI such as

- requiring AI firms to allow South African publishers to opt out of AI summaries and training datasets
- mandating negotiated compensation or referral traffic from AI-powered services, and
- encouraging the development of alternative monetisation mechanisms if traffic remains negligible (Competition Commission, 2025)

Platforms such as OpenAI, Google, Meta and Microsoft were also expected to support education programmes for local publishers and to prevent over-representation of global media in AI-driven news queries.

[6] This recommendation gained significance when, two months after the Provisional Report was published, a major precedent was set in the United States as District Judge Leonie Brinkema ruled that Google violated antitrust laws by monopolising publisher ad servers and ad exchanges in online advertising technology. The court found it unlawfully tied its ad server to its ad exchange, harming competition, publishers and consumers (Reuters, 2025).

Fair compensation

In 2025, the Commission concluded that fair compensation was warranted in response to anti-competitive harm, and that structural remedies were necessary to address systemic distortions in the market.

The Provisional Report found that digital platforms, especially Google, extracted substantial value from South African news media without fair compensation, and to address this, it recommended

- time-bound compensation ranging from R300- to R500-million annually
- enhanced referral traffic and data sharing, and
- structural remedies such as SEO support and algorithmic corrections

If platforms failed to comply, a 5 to 10% digital advertising levy should fund a Media Industry Fund supporting diversity, public broadcasting and media sustainability (Competition Commission South Africa, 2025a).[7]

Response to Google objections

In March 2025, Google strongly disagreed with the Commission's findings amid a growing global debate about the platform's role in the media ecosystem. This was not a surprise as Google had differed with the premise of the MDPMI in its 2023 submission, maintaining

- it earns negligible revenue from news
- its snippets and search results boost, rather than replace, publisher traffic
- its relationship with publishers is not one of bargaining but free referral
- news publishers retain full control over search indexing and preview length, and
- ad tech markets are competitive, interoperable and characterised by publishers typically using multiple providers (Google, 2023: 3–9, 15–19, 21)

In November 2024, Google initiated an experiment to assess the value of news content to its services by removing more than 13 000 news sites from Search, Google News and Discover for 1% of users in eight EU countries – Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain.

The experiment concluded in January 2025, and Google published the results in March 2025, stating that when it removed this content, 'there was no change to Search ad revenue and a <1% (0.8%) drop in usage, which indicates that any lost usage was from queries that generated minimal or no revenue' (Google, 2025b).

[7] A more in-depth assessment of the financial remedies proposed by the Commission is still required.

In March 2025, Google reinforced this position in a blog post titled, ‘A sustainable future for South African news’, warning it was ‘concerned that the Commission’s proposals could lead to unintended consequences that make it harder for people to find quality news online’ (Google, 2025b).

The company claimed that its platforms already provide ‘billions of clicks to South African publishers at no cost’ and that its services ‘help people find trusted journalism across the web’. It argued that imposing mandatory compensation could harm small publishers and reduce access to information for users.

‘While we support the Commission’s goal to help news publishers thrive in the digital age,’ wrote Google, ‘we believe some of the proposals in the report may have the opposite effect – hurting both publishers and the South Africans who rely on Google to find information’ (Google, 2025b).

The 2024 experiment sparked widespread criticism from media researchers, SEO consultants and competition experts. As reported in *Press Gazette* (Maher, 2024), critics pointed to flaws in the experimental design and advancing a ‘self-serving narrative’.

In its April 2025 submission, the SANEF-led alliance disagreed with Google’s criticisms of the Provisional Report, saying ‘this assertion obscures the extent to which platforms already control the information ecosystem – through self-interested algorithmic design, opaque ranking systems and extractive Adtech structures.

‘It is precisely the lack of enforceable obligations that has allowed dominant platforms to design market conditions to their advantage. While Google claims to deliver traffic to publishers, this does not equate to fairness, nor does it create sustainable revenue models.

‘Referral traffic is not an adequate substitute for transparent obligations, particularly in light of the increasing reliance on zero-click results, content scraping and the shift to AI-generated answers.’ (SANEF et al., 2025a: 12)

The alliance also raised concerns about Google’s selective interpretation of experimental results and its continued resistance to public interest accountability, arguing that the framing of ‘news value’ as purely transactional ignored the broader systemic role that journalism plays.

Most importantly, the alliance wrote that ‘Google should be urged to engage in “collaboration” – with publishers and broader members of the media industry – as this

Inquiry continues its work, and it should do so in good faith, [with the] submitting parties … available and open to these discussions'.

At the time of finalising this chapter, the Competition Commission had published all non-confidential submissions on its Provisional Report, including the SANEF alliance and Google's submissions. While space does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of Google's 279-page submission, it suffices to say that the company went into significantly more detail to substantiate its positions elucidated in its March 2025 blog piece.

Google reiterated that its products deliver substantial value to both users and publishers and rejected many of the Commission's findings as based on incorrect assumptions about market power, data usage and competitive harm.

While Google's submission is notably extensive and technically sophisticated, it largely reiterates familiar arguments that deflect structural accountability. It emphasises consumer benefit and innovation as justifications for practices the Commission has found to be exclusionary or distortive — such as self-preferencing, limited data sharing and opacity around ranking algorithms.

In response to proposed remedies, Google invokes privacy and intellectual property concerns but offers only marginal voluntary measures in return. Its defence of zero-click search, for instance, downplays the systemic impact on traffic to local publishers.

Ultimately, the submission reflects a firm pushback against rights-based regulation, preferring self-regulation and tools under Google's own control — a stance that does little to address the Commission's central concerns about power asymmetries and market fairness (Google, 2025c).

Civil society engagement and participatory influence

While the SANEF-led alliance was not alone in calling for a broadened inquiry, its submissions from 2023 onwards were distinctive in positioning civil society as a stakeholder bloc and a normative voice advancing rights-based regulatory thinking.

By strategically leveraging written and oral procedural mechanisms, the alliance demonstrated that deliberative participation can inform and enrich complex competition inquiries.

Parallel submissions and shared advocacy

The alliance employed a layered strategy of participation, combining joint submissions with individual presentations that allowed its members to offer complementary perspectives. For example, key members the GIBS MLTT, MMA and SOS made separate oral submissions to emphasise their areas of expertise (Markovitz, 2024; Media Monitoring Africa, 2024).

This allowed the alliance to function as a coalition with shared advocacy goals and as a pluralistic formation of organisations highlighting legal, constitutional, policy and technical angles to the Inquiry.

This supported the procedural legitimacy of the Inquiry by reinforcing that participation extended beyond formal stakeholders to organised public interest constituencies.

Influence on inquiry depth and legitimacy

The Commission did not issue any public statement attributing its approach to civil society submissions, but the evident alignment between themes raised by the SANEF-led alliance and the broader analytical scope of the Provisional Report suggest such input helped deepen the normative framing of the Inquiry.

It did so by foregrounding the democratic importance of community and independent media, the need for transparency and fairness in algorithmic systems and the concept of public interest journalism as a right, not a commodity – just as the alliance had done.

This influence reinforced the Inquiry’s democratic character, demonstrating that participatory governance in a digital economy is both possible and productive when rooted in organised, rights-based civil society engagement.

Conclusion: an interim evaluation

This moment offers a glimpse of what civil society can achieve when it engages with focus, co-ordination and normative clarity. Thus, the alliance’s role in the MDPMI signals an important development in South African digital policy discourse, recognising that platform power is not only about economics, but rights, representation and the future of democratic media systems.

A final assessment will be written after the release of the Final Report, and these themes will be revisited to assess whether civil society’s influence has endured, expanded or been diluted – and whether the MDPMI ultimately delivers on its potential to reframe digital platform governance in the public interest.

In so doing, it will explore how long-term structural reform in digital media markets can be shaped not only by regulators, but by the public they serve.

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Part B: Case Studies of Southern African media engaging with Digital Transformation

Digital transitions in South African print newsrooms

A case study of the *Mail & Guardian**

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This case study is based on the author's doctoral thesis on the *Mail & Guardian* digital transition, written between 2016 and 2021. The complete study, titled *Going Online: An analysis of shifts in journalism practice in the Mail & Guardian's history of digitisation*, can be found online.

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Introduction

It was inside a small pink office repurposed from a hairdressing salon that the *Weekly Mail* was born on 14 June 1985. The launch happened in the middle of Braamfontein, Johannesburg, in the still-standing Kenroydon Building on 25 Melle Street (De Waal, 2010).

This was a mere six weeks after the closure of the *Rand Daily Mail* (RDM) newspaper and a round of retrenchments at the *Sunday Express*, leaving the *Weekly Mail* founders, Anton Harber and Irwin Manoim, fortuitously out of work.

In its tenth year, and confronted with the new technology called the Internet, the publication transitioned, somewhat, from print to pixels.
The Mail & Guardian (M&G), as the Weekly Mail came to be known, was the first news publication in South Africa to go online in 1994, followed by Afrikaans publication Beeld. The launch of both preceded that of what is now the country's largest online news site, News24, in 1998.

Despite its four-year head start, the *M&G* website was unable to disrupt the practice of journalism in the country compared to the launch and exponential growth of the digital News24. The latter marked a turning point in approaches to online journalism in South Africa as the site and its significantly high traffic convincingly mainstreamed online journalism in South Africa and effectively put an end to print's hold on 'breaking news'.

The *M&G* is a relatively small newsroom in comparison to more well-resourced newsrooms in South Africa like those of Arena Holdings (formerly known as Times Media) or Independent Media. As a result, it faces significantly more pressure to ensure strong and sustained circulation numbers.

The story of how the *M&G* managed its digital transition is instructive for many similar-sized entities looking to undertake the same, from print or alongside print.

The *M&G* went live with its website through a subsidiary company called the Electronic Mail & Guardian (eM&G), headed by former co-editor Manoim and former *M&G* news editor Bruce Cohen.

South Africa had connected to the Internet just four years earlier through its national academic network, Uninet. Corporate South Africa went online in 1992 with several commercial '.za' registrations. The domain name, 'mg.co.za', which remains in use today, was registered on 2 August 1995.

The move to digital for print journalists, like those at the *M&G*, across the world, meant more than just publishing on a website. It changed the ways in which news is sourced, produced, distributed and by whom. It also impacted the skills needed to produce news and has affected the way in which journalists are expected to interact with news consumers who are closer to the centre of production than ever before.

This is a shift hastened by the rapid growth of social media.

Most critically, the shift to digital upended traditional revenue models that sustained the news industry for generations, throwing it into a freefall where it has remained for at least 30 years.

This case study of the *M&G* reflects on an organisation which experimented with technology and, in the process, reconfigured how it practised journalism over the course of its history. Unfortunately, much of that experimentation resulted in internal reconfiguration but did not significantly shift the needle in terms of audience growth.

Brief history of the M&G

The birth of the *M&G* (or the *Weekly Mail*, as it was known for eight years after its launch in 1985) and its online version many years later, could not have happened in more disparate circumstances (Manoim, 1996).

The print newspaper, originally founded by a group of retrenched journalists, came to life in a year of South Africa's history characterised by widespread anti-apartheid protests and heavy repression of the media under a partial State of Emergency.

These developments were par for the course in a country known at the time for the oppression and subjugation of most of its people, and for its censorship of the press.

At the other end of the historical spectrum, the online *M&G*, the first online newspaper in Africa, was launched in 1994, symbolising the birth of democracy in South Africa and bringing with it unprecedented levels of press freedom to match individual and political freedoms.

A brief history of the organisation is recounted here to highlight the culture of agility, experimentation and innovation which took root in the very early days of the organisation. This culture is what is required today as news organisations operate in environments seemingly hostile to the news product.

The 1980s was a decade of upheaval and turbulence in South Africa, but of the kind that ultimately moved the country to its present democratic state. The apartheid system, extensively documented from various vantage points, clamped down on press freedom and freedom of speech to maintain its control over the flow of information and ideas inside and outside the country's borders.

Emergency regulations armed the apartheid government with extensive authoritarian measures to stifle the free flow of information on politically sensitive issues and to muzzle dissenting voices, making the latter half of the decade the bleakest years for press freedom.

Harber and Manoim conceptualised their new paper within this context and drove the fundraising efforts for its establishment. Both pooled their retrenchment packages as seed money for the new newspaper and became its first editors ahead of its first edition on 14 June 1985.

A company was formed and shares, at R1 000 each, were sold to whomever would entertain the idea and share the ideals of the new publication and its tiny team. This was a very early form of what is popularly known as a membership model. The team reached out to prominent and influential left-leaning South Africans through networks of people involved in the set-up and production of the paper.

A month before launch in June 1985, the company raised R40 000 – far from what was needed to start a paper. But it was their innovative approach to technology that made it possible for the *Weekly Mail* to exist.

The company paid its registration fee of R5 000 as required by the Newspaper and Imprint Act, which allowed it to operate. Its registration, like every other newspaper in the country, happened under intense scrutiny from the state's security police who paid close attention to the copy produced.

Despite the statutory regulations hindering the development of independent, anti-apartheid media, the paper saw an average circulation of between 12 to 15 000 in its first year of operation.

When Apple South Africa shut its doors in September 1985 as sanctions against the country intensified in the wake of the States of Emergency, the *Weekly Mail* acquired some of Apple's abandoned equipment, comprising primarily some very basic Macintosh computers which were used for several years in its newsroom.

Manoim developed a basic network between the Macintoshes in the Braamfontein office and a recently acquired laser printer, demonstrating a level of innovation uncommon in South African newsrooms at that time. He writes that 'in the back room … a newspaper was being produced without the benefit of a single item of conventional newspaper equipment' (1996:17).

It was within this low-tech and cash-strapped environment that the visions of a self-described 'technical godfather' became possible (Manoim, 1996:2; Tomaselli & Louw, 1991). Manoim was a cobbler of whatever was at his disposal, even referring to himself and the *Weekly Mail* team as ' … cheapskates. But we were inventive cheapskates. We managed to do, with very little, things other people only managed to do with a great deal' (De Waal, 2010:71).

The *Weekly Mail* Society as a membership model of the 1980s

The *Weekly Mail* Society appeared to be the only structure of its kind in the South African newspaper industry in the 1980s. 'The point was that all members of the society would pay a membership fee, initially, in return for which they would receive, posted free of charge in a plain brown envelope, the society's weekly newsletter,' writes Manoim (1996:7).

He adds that, 'There were some vague ideas that the society might offer members discounts on books or arrange events like book fairs … ' (1996:7).

The Society went further than contemporary membership models, though, in that it had a constitution which paved the way for the members themselves to elect an editorial board for the organisation (Manoim, 1996:7).

'The core of the Society would be a group called the Founder Subscribers, who were people willing to show their commitment by buying two-year subscriptions at R180. If enough people signed up as Founder Subscribers, we would raise sufficient money to proceed. If we failed to raise enough money, we would return the subscription money,' read a pamphlet developed by the *Weekly Mail* team which they distributed to their networks (Manoim, 1996: 11).

This distribution to a known network also meant that the *Weekly Mail* would attract a like-minded reader and subscriber. This was a move which ultimately worked against their intentions to attract a diverse audience.

The organisation's editorial board functioned as a marketing tool. Acknowledging that neither he nor Harber were particularly well known and lacked significant public personae, Manoim writes that they realised there was a need to bring public figures on board to give the paper some credibility and weight.

'So we invented an "editorial board" '(Manoim, 1996:20), of which Patrick Laurence and political analyst Steven Friedman constituted the first*,* which also included representatives of the *Weekly Mail* Society.

The editorial board was to be an experiment in reader participation. The board met once a week for about six weeks to go through the previous edition to prepare for the next but proved unsustainable as the members were unable to spare that time on a regular basis.

' … The burden upon people with full-time jobs soon became too great; many of the stories readers suggested were simply beyond our means … Reader participation evaporated.' (Manoim, 1996:20)

That the board's role was eviscerated over time is not the main point here. What is significant and noteworthy is that in 1980s, the *Weekly Mail* was piloting a model of reader participation, engagement and subscription which seems only to have appeared with the process of convergence among other media players in the mid-2000s.

Manoim also reflects on the proximity of the readers of the *Weekly Mail* to the staff of the publication, which meant that there was constant and direct feedback between the producers and the readers of the paper when they found themselves at the same watering hole.

'On any weekend in the mid-Eighties, a sizeable portion of the *Weekly Mail's* readership were to be found crammed shoulder-to-shoulder in Jameson's (a local pub on Joburg's Commissioner Street). So were the *Weekly Mail's* staff.

'This was the only newspaper whose readers could complain personally to the editors, because they were bound to be sitting at the next table.' (Manoim, 1996:31)

This, in my view, was a form of interaction and engagement between the producers of the paper and those who consumed it. Modern membership models strive to achieve the same interaction around the news, albeit in a digital space.

Going daily to improve revenue

On 20 June 1990, the *Weekly Mail* launched the *Daily Mail* which lasted for a total of 11 weeks before its closure on 4 September 1990. A *Financial Mail* report announcing the launch of the *Daily Mail* believed the market for daily newspapers was 'saturated', and advertising expenditure effectively declining – giving possible reasons for the dismal performance.

The same report included a Times Media cost analysis which showed that the *Weekly Mail* was losing around R400 000 a year (*Financial Mail*, 1990). The fallout was significant, and such was the level of desperation to rescue the situation that Harber confirmed, as reported in the *Ci izen* newspaper, that 'a *Daily Mail* staff member had had informal discussions with the ANC "as all options were being looked into" '(*The Ci izen*, 1990).

The latter resonates with many in the current media industry desperately seeking solutions to a devastating and unrelenting funding crisis.

Forty staff members lost their jobs in the wake of the *Daily Mail* closure, with the remaining 73 moving to the *Weekly Mail* team (*The Star*, 1990). *The Star* wrote on the day of the *Daily Mail* last edition that staff were only going to be told on that day if they were to be retained (1990:3).

The Star reported the day after the closure that 'there were tearful scenes in the newsroom when the final orders came through' (*The Star*, 1990). Harber told *The Star* that a special fund 'is to be created to assist members of staff who cannot find jobs immediately' (*The Star*, 1990).

Collaboration to improve revenue

The failed *Daily Mail* project was followed about 18 months later by another attempt at raising money for the cash-strapped *Weekly Mail*. The 28 February 1992 edition of the *Weekly Mail* announced a partnership with the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper, which would involve the South African paper carrying the 32-page international edition known as the *Guardian Weekly* from 9 April 1992.

The Guardian, founded in 1821, is funded through the Scott Trust which was set up after the death of owner and former editor Charles Scott in 1932 (Rusbridger, 2018:18; Mody, 2014:76). The Scott family set up the trust in 1936 and it was used to fund *The Guardian* and, until December 2024[8], the *Observer*, newspapers through the Guardian Media Group (GMP).

The world news section of the *Weekly Mail* would be replaced by copy provided by *The Guardian* based in Manchester at the time. The 29 July 1993 edition of the *Weekly Mail*

[8] Tortoise, a British news website espousing 'slow journalism', bought *The Observer* from the GMP and the Scott Trust, despite a strike by GMP journalists in a bid to delay the deal

announced the amalgamation of the two papers with a new masthead that still endures in some form in the masthead of the present-day *M&G*.

The paper was renamed the *Weekly Mail & Guardian*, the package deal the start of a longer and more involved relationship between the titles that ultimately allowed the *Weekly Mail* to stay afloat.

The Guardian sent their copy to the *Weekly Mail* for local publishing and carried the local printing costs, with the cover price for the bundle remaining unchanged at R2,50 (*Finance Week,* 1992:20).

The deal put a band aid on the *M&G*'s enduring cash-flow problem but did little to conceptualise a digital strategy for the organisation whose technology was declining. This is especially surprising, given that a digital transition was taking shape at *The Guardian* itself.

‘In 1993, some journalists began to be dimly aware of something clunkily referred to as the “information superhighway”, but few had ever had reason to see it in action,’ wrote former editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, of what was happening globally in online journalism at the time.

At the start of 1995, only 491 newspapers were online worldwide, the *M&G* one of those since its website had launched in 1994. But the lack of a dedicated strategy, coupled with the fact that mainstream Internet usage was still a long way off (Fin24, 2016), meant the *M&G* could not grow its offering significantly, while guardian.co.uk launched in 1999 and is today considered one of the big successes in online journalism.

The Guardian became the majority shareholder by increasing its stake to 62% in the *Weekly Mail & Guardian* in 1998 (Mody, 2014:76), but by 2002, this had been reduced to 10%, at which point, the GMP ‘sold an 87.5% majority holding to Zimbabwean publisher and entrepreneur Trevor Ncube of Newtrust Company Botswana Limited’ (Mody, 2014:76), which ushered in a period of an intentional transition to digital journalism.

email distribution and the *M&G* Online Forum

In its early years, the *Weekly Mail* was distributed by its staff, who tried to get the paper to the front doors of as many of its readers as possible (Manoim, 1996). Former editor Rex Gibson writes that, ‘The *Weekly Mail* quickly established a reputation for vigorous investigation, perceptive writing and liberal inclinations’ (2007:186).

Some of the copies were sent abroad via the postal system, which increasingly became too expensive to be profitable (Manoim, 1996), and it was technology which once again provided a solution to this barrier.

Through a connection between the *Weekly Mail’s* Cohen and computer science lecturer Phillip Machanick, Manoim found himself in contact with a group of students who would later become the founders of pioneering South African Internet service provision company, Internet Solutions (De Waal, 2010:72).

This group provided a digital solution to the postal system dilemma, allowing the newspaper in text format to be distributed via email, which, according to Manoim, 'turned a major loss into a small profit' (De Waal, 2010:76). It is a clear example of innovative use of technology to solve a problem for which the technology was not intended.

On 25 March 1994, Machanick (1994a) posted a message to an Internet newsgroup with the subject line: '*Weekly Mail* on the net', announcing the availability of the (text-only) email version of the newspaper.

'To all those who sent me mail about interest in the Internet version of the *Weekly Mail*: you should receive a personal response from Bruce Cohen. For a week, to see what interest there is, they are offering a free issue by ftp or e-mail', wrote Machanick (1994a).

A couple of months later, in August 1994, Machanick (1994b) posted another message to the newsgroup announcing the launch of the *M&G* Online Forum, 'a simple multiple e-mail service [which] will enable subscribers interested in discussing issues and stories in the *Mail* to communicate with one another, send letters to the editor, etc'.

The Forum was the *M&G's* first instance of online audience engagement or interactivity allowing users to talk to one another. The digital or electronic offerings during this period were extended through an online searchable database of the email editions developed by Steve Song, a visitor from Canada assisting the South African NGO network, Sangonet, at the time, and the *M&G* Forum lasted a remarkable 15 years, until 19 June 2009.

'The early Internet was not for techno-sissies'

The intentions of the *M&G's* subsidiary company were bold and not short on vision, as can be seen by this announcement in 1995: 'The new division, eM&G, will be focused on expanding the *M&G's* Internet profile, developing specialised electronic services to harness the publishing opportunities presented by the Internet.' (*Mail & Guardian*, 1995)

At the time, the *M&G*, at 10 years old, appeared to be moving towards a clearly defined digital strategy which included the electronic version of the weekly paper, the searchable online archive and a supplement called *PC Review Online*, edited by Manoim and the *M&G* Forum.

This multi-pronged digital strategy embraced the hypertextuality and interactivity of the online publishing space and recognised that audiences or users were now part of the business of journalism. But the strategy of the new division seemed to operate in a silo, eschewing the convergence in skills between the different groups of individuals in the newsroom.

Copy for the website was gleaned from copy for the Friday weekly newspaper. ‘We began doing what no other South African newspaper website had done … we wrote our own articles and produced a publication entirely distinct from the print edition, updated 18 hours a day,’ writes Manoim of the first web articles (De Waal, 2010:76).

It is this distinction between the *M&G* in print and online, which persisted into the Covid-19 lockdown, which caused it to falter in its attempts at a digital transition. The *M&G* was not operating as one publication reaching audiences via different products; it was an organisation producing two products to reach audiences on two platforms.

Given the relatively small size of the organisation, the focus on separate products was always bound to be a challenge.

In 1997, eM&G announced that it had sold a controlling stake of 65% to MWeb, a deal that brought little to the *M&G* apart from a seemingly endless battle to buy back these very same shares to re-establish its independence.

Commenting on the deal with MWeb, Manoim, the editor of the eM&G, said it ‘will give us the support to take Internet reporting to new levels of professionalism, offering reporting and entertainment that's delivered faster than radio, but with a range as broad as a national newspaper’(*Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1997).

There were early successes for the eM&G, which, by 1997, was reporting 2,4-million unique website hits. ‘Independent audits of various online newspapers have shown that the eM&G outstrips its closest competitors by more than four times.’ (*Weekly Mail & Guardian*, 1997)

But while the *M&G* had established itself as a leader in online journalism with a remarkable online audience, the organisation itself had not converged, in the sense that the print newspaper still operated separately from the online division of the organisation.

The sale of the shares for sustainability’s sake to MWeb is a valuable lesson for news organisations looking to capitalise on their offerings. The short-term relief offered by the deal turned into a long-term headache.

An African owner with a continental and digital outlook

Ncube acquired the *M&G* when it was bleeding money amid a strained print newspaper context in which going digital seemed to be the answer. ‘When I took over, it was a turbulent time. Infighting was rife, particularly between the editorial department and the management. Morale was low, and the company was losing an average of R12m a year,’ said Ncube (De Waal, 2010:6). He also revealed that, before his acquisition, the company was sitting with a loss of R15m (*Politicsweb*, 2017).

Ncube was unequivocal about the online business, noting: ‘We had to undo the mess of the online division. Because of the way it had begun in the late 1990s and subsequent developments, it was 65% owned by the competition (MWeb). Our growth was obstructed at every turn.'

'The shareholding agreement was so onerous, I'm surprised we could even send an email without obtaining MWeb's permission.' (De Waal, 2010:7)

Ncube's initial impression of the organisational structure was that 'editorial called all the shots, and the business unit was practically non-existent' (De Waal 2010:6) – his assessment congruent with the *M&G*'s annual report, as reported in the media, that the revenue of the paper was based on 25% advertising and 75% editorial.

Between 2003 and 2005, under Ncube's watch, the *M&G* Online had three dedicated staff members who uploaded content to the website from the Friday paper. This group included a general manager, a sub-editor and chief sub-editor (Mody, 2014:76).

Matthew Buckland, a digital entrepreneur, joined the organisation in 2001 as the head of the online division, replacing Manoim. At the time, the online editor's position 'meant everything from being responsible for the content on the site to being the main tech liaison, to looking after the commercials on the site' (Buckland, 2019:30). But the division itself and the separate staffing complement aligned with a two-pronged publishing strategy in which the print newspaper was the main product.

Despite the focus on digital-first, Ncube trimmed the organisational structure by eliminating all business units that he believed were not germane to the newspaper, which he referred to as the 'core product', itself (De Waal, 2010:6). De Waal (2019, interview) noted that this strategy was quite ironic, as it was Ncube who'd embarked on a pan-African project through *M&G Africa*, a new business initiative that was not close to the *M&G* newspaper at the time.

Describing Ncube as a man who broke his own rules, De Waal (2019, interview) pointed out that while Ncube was cutting back on units within the organisation for financial reasons, he was also promoting the *M&G Africa* business 'which was very expensive and made no money'.

The pan-African experiment appeared to be a wasteful exercise and left the *M&G* in serious financial difficulties a year after its launch.

'Bad business decisions at the cash-strapped *Mail & Guardian* have led to the newspaper's biggest round of retrenchments yet, leaving the future of one of South Africa's oldest independent newspapers in the balance', wrote Timeslive in 2015, going on to blame the *M&G Africa* experiment, along with Ncube's focus on digital, as the reasons for the dire financial situation (Timeslive, 2015).

'Consultants have recommended that he (Ncube) cut his multimedia team and the unit responsible for uploading content onto iPads.'

The makings of an online journalism organisation were there, but the lack of convergence between various part of the journalism practice at the *M&G* was part of the reason that individual roles related to specific platforms were being cut.

Perhaps the most decisive push to a digital-first newsroom at the *M&G* came with the appointment of Nic Dawes as editor-in-chief in June 2009. Dawes and Chris Roper, who he appointed as the online editor shortly after his own appointment, were committed to the digital- and social-first transition of the organisation.

In 2011, Roper told Bizcommunity (2011a) about a redesign of the website to make full use of digital and social media tools. But he admitted, ‘the tricky bit is having a weekly newspaper and a 24-hour website – and when you publish what. So, it's a constantly evolving thing’ (Bizcommunity, 2011a).

The quote points to the conundrum that was at the heart of the *M&G*'s digital- and social-first problems – the inability to manage both the print newspaper and the digital platforms concurrently.

At the time, Roper said the digital team of the *M&G* comprised 14 editorial people along with five technical specialists – the best-resourced set-up in the organisation's history to date.

The *M&G* announced its ‘digital-first’ strategy to its staff in March 2012, according to the *State of the Newsroom* 2014 report, becoming a ‘true hybrid publisher, experiencing significant growth in its digital audience over the previous few years with a 60% growth in audience for *M&G Online*, a 2000% growth in audience from mobile and an 81% growth in its overall publisher audience over the past year alone’, according to an *M&G* press release.

The *M&G* publisher at the time, Anastacia Martin, explained it would try and reach audiences through whatever tools were available, ‘be they audio-visual stories, podcasts, original stories or aggregated content’ (Daniels, 2014).

‘Our readers are in print, but as we now provide rich media too, we talk about audience as we reach them through both visual and auditory channels.’

In a piece written when he departed from the organisation in 2013, Dawes wrote, ‘At the *M&G*, we are insistent that digital forms of news gathering, engagement and delivery are not a threat to our relevance and our commercial survival’ (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013).

‘On the contrary, they are crucial to ensuring both. Social media allows us not just to hear our audience, but also to make it part of the news process. The web means we are no longer bidding for attention once a week in a dying market; instead, we have become one of the largest news sites in the country, going toe-to-toe on an hourly basis with companies an order of magnitude larger.

‘Powerful new technology, from data and video to HTML5 and tablets, is enriching our journalism, and we are doing better work in print too as a result.’ (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013)

The digital-first move for the organisation was publicly announced in August 2013, shortly after Roper was appointed editor-in-chief (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013d). But it came at the cost of retrenchments, which was an indication that the company was not doing as well as it had in previous years.

Roper said in a statement that ‘transforming a legacy print business into a digital media business required a total re-engineering of resources and staff [which] necessitated retraining and repurposing of people, as well as a re-evaluation of business goals’ (*Mail & Guardian*, 2013d).

These are critical lessons for an industry continually reimagining itself in pursuit of financial sustainability some 30 years after the *M&G* went through its restructuring.

In 2015, Roper introduced a convergence strategy to the organisation, writing that, ‘The days of separate digital, commercial and editorial strategies, working in isolation, are over – the strategy is a converged strategy, and the component parts cannot exist without the whole’ (Roper, email communications, 2020). Roper's strategy was a digital-first one and not a print-first one.

The strategy was made up of three parts:

- digital, which included technology and advertising platforms
- commercial, which spoke to what’s necessary to execute the strategy, and
- editorial, which outlined how content products would build audience, create products that provided revenue-generating opportunities and further built the *M&G* brand

The intention of the strategy was to converge the *M&G* newsroom, which meant several things, including:

- the development of a membership club which would build a relationship with the audience of the *M&G*
- improving analytical information to improve the organisation's overview of its audiences, and
- a reworking of the sub-editing department to ‘allow for greater quality and control of original digital content’ (Roper, email communications, 2020)

Less than three months later, Roper resigned from the *M&G* and was replaced by Verashni Pillay in October 2015 (Marklives.com, 2015). On Roper's departure, *M&G* CEO Hoosain Karjieker (*Mail & Guardian*, 2015) wrote of Roper's impact as editor that ‘this resulted in the successful convergence of all editorial processes to form a fully-fledged, multiplatform newsroom that now forms the cornerstone of our future digital ambitions’.

Unfortunately, as history shows us, Roper's intentions to shift the *M&G* to a fully converged, digital-first newsroom were not realised, and somewhere along the line, the digital transition of the organisation fell by the wayside once again.

An appeal for help

In early 2020, the *M&G* appealed to its reader-base for assistance in raising funds to sustain the organisation. During its financial crisis, then-deputy editor Beauregard Tromp wrote: ‘From the founding of the paper in 1985 and the introduction of the then-revolutionary idea of desktop publishing, to launching the first online news publication in Africa in 1994, the *M&G*’s early adoption of technological advances has been integral to its success.’

‘What went wrong between then and now is a story that has more answers than column inches allow.’ (Tromp, 2020)

That the *M&G* has shown significant signs of innovation and experimentation is clear. However, as this case study shows, maintaining a print newspaper with a limited staff complement and a lack of a clear strategy while attempting to transition to an online publication has, in part, hampered the process.

Citizen journalism and blogging as a part of the M&G’s offerings

From the mid-2000s, the *M&G* was saying all the right things when it came to the digital transition. But from that point to the present day, the organisation has lagged behind industry peers in its attempts to transition to digital.

In November 2007, Buckland presented the organisation’s digital strategy to a session at the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in Dublin. In the presentation, he described his understanding of Web 2.0, which was to ‘get closer to the reader, create community’ (Buckland, 2007b), an approach which seems as relevant today as it did 18 years ago.

It seems from this presentation that the approach to digital at the organisation at the time, was to deploy a multi-brand approach made possible by the technology of the Internet. ‘Our Web 2.0 projects blog strategy – amatomu.com (regional blog aggregator) – Amagama.com (blog hosting) – thoughtleader.co.za (blog/media hybrid) – Also... newsinphotos.co.za – Facebook apps & Facebook groups (and... podcasts; social bookmarking, RSS etc.)’ read one of the slides in the presentation (Buckland, 2008).

At the heart of all of this was a focus on the audience, which Buckland addressed in a 2008 presentation on citizen media which was years ahead of similar discussions in the broader industry. He identified four key principles which he believed were key to making user analytics data, which he called ‘intelligence’, work for an organisation.

These included:

- consistent gatekeeping to ensure a high quality of UGC (user generated content)

- segmentation of the audience to identify users of quality who would be allowed to comment or contribute
- focus on quality content, and
- collaboration with citizen media, which included sharing traffic and ad revenue data (Buckland, 2008)

The *M&G* embarked on an online real estate splurge in 2007, setting up several sites for the co-option of UGC.

What follows is a description of these various initiatives and how the organisation attempted to engage the audience in line with digital news media trends of the time which were congruent with its digital strategy.

Thought Leader

Thought Leader was launched by the *M&G* in 2007 as a platform for bloggers with a relatively high public profile. Unlike the various other digital experiments of the *M&G* at the time, *Thought Leader* was clearly branded part of the *M&G* stable.

The concept was a precursor to ideas which led to the development of the *Daily Maverick* in its early iterations – that is, an online space for opinion and commentary, with a news angle at times, but certainly not journalism in the accepted, normative sense.

The idea, it appears, was to harness the power of the personal journalist to build the brand of the *M&G*. *Thought Leader* co-founder Buckland wrote that 'it aims to be a place where *M&G* journalists, columnists and other writers, commentators, intellectuals and opinion makers across various industries and political spectrums meet'.

'But it's not only a platform for some of the country's established writers and personalities, [it's] also home to some of the country's up-and-coming writers.' (Buckland, 2007)

In a presentation about convergence in the media, Buckland said two weeks after its launch, the site had attracted 65 contributors, published 300 articles and amassed 500 comments – a serious uptake of the platform in the still-nascent South African digital space.

None of this brought in any revenue to the *M&G*, but Buckland believed the blog's value was in extending the reach of the brand. The blogging space in South Africa in 2007 was quite expansive in terms of UGC sites, with reportedly 17 000 individual blogs in existence by 2007. But they were limited in activity, with only 4 000 to 5 000 people actively blogging (*Mail & Guardian*, 2007).

Some saw *Thought Leader* as a kind of citizen journalism, but the site was a move in a completely different direction for media in South Africa. Buckland described the site as containing 'UGC from a select, closed network' with full editorial control by the *M&G* team, which included sub-editing of submitted content.

To that extent, he called it an 'editorial blog', as the platform was very closely aligned with the *M&G* and its regular editorial processes, including passing through the filter of Riaan Wolmarans, the first online editor of the blog.

Some of the better *Thought Leader* content made it into the weekly newspaper under the *Thought Leader* banner, which filled up space in the paper but did not add to the business itself. In the end, the emphasis on quality content and influential people was a marketing gimmick aimed at deepening perceptions about the paper and its ideal audiences.

Buckland said the option to reach out to contributors, not as columnists but as bloggers, was deliberate, as it gave them a feeling of being invited and, therefore, special. 'Build audience by making influential people part of your site; as leaders in their fields, they bring their networks to you.' (Buckland, 2007a)

The *Amatomu* and *Amagama* blogging experiments

Buckland pointed out that the *Thought Leader* blog was one of three strands in the *M&G's* blogging strategy, *Amatomu* and *Amagama* being the other two.

Amatomu and *Amagama* were loosely affiliated to the *M&G. Amagama* seems to have shown no relationship to the *M&G,* apart from an email address to report abusive comments, which was linked to the main 'mg.co.za' domain. *Amagama* ran like the listservs and chatrooms of the early Internet – a community posting content and then talking to each other about that content and other matters.

Buckland described the site, which shut down in May 2009, as being much like an Internet Service Provider (ISP), granting the space but not meddling in the content until a problem was flagged by a user (Buckland, 2007e).

Amatomu, on the other hand, was a blog aggregator, calling itself the 'South African blogosphere'. It contained some advertising for the *M&G* along with the masthead of the *M&G Online* in the footer of the homepage, clearly linking the two sites together. Buckland saw it as a portal for local blogs, with the service of providing analytics to the contributors (Buckland, 2007e).

Apart from this, the blogs ran independently of the *M&G*, and it is not clear how running these two entities would ever have benefited the core product of the newspaper or its online version. In his presentation to WAN-IFRA, Buckland commented on the high number of daily page impressions for *Amatomu*, at some 350 000, but gave no indication of how this was linked to the business of the *M&G*.

It appears from his comments elsewhere that the blogs were intended as a marketing gimmick for the newspaper, although he did not demonstrate how the one benefited the other. It seems to have been a missed opportunity to capitalise on the gains of these blogs – to build a solid and dedicated online audience for the *M&G*. But operating as separate entities and not a convergence meant that the *M&G*'s digital transition ran out of steam.

Other *M&G* online experiments

Another initiative by the *M&G* digital team in 2007 was 'newsinphotos.co.za' – a site that featured the best of the *M&G's* photography and invited readers to submit their own shots[9]. This site was clearly branded as an *M&G* product and consisted of numerous links back to the core product, the 'mg.co.za' homepage.

The site, 'voicesofafrica.co.za', launched in 2013 to host stories from African contributors about everyday life on the continent. It closed in September 2015 but seems to have hosted more content from wire services than original content from local contributors.

As with many of the blogs hosted by the *M&G* since 2007, the content on 'voicesofafrica.co.za' was not monetised in any way, and the audiences came from the people who were themselves contributors. In essence, they had conceptualised echo chambers even before social media made this concept popular.

All of these initiatives were ahead of their time in that the *M&G,* through the efforts of individuals like Buckland, was trying to facilitate more user interaction between journalists and audiences using available technologies to bring audiences closer to the centre of the organisation, and to push audiences towards a more open space for the exchange of ideas and information.

This achieved some of the interactivity and hypertextuality expected in the practice of online journalism which distinguished the latter from print journalism. These aims were facilitated by social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter which were more user-friendly and cheaper in that they were freely accessible, acting as third-party platforms that could be harnessed by journalism practitioners to reach and engage with audiences.

But, as history shows us, these platforms have also come to represent the greatest threat to the future of journalism itself.

Audiences and revenue models

One of the biggest and most critical shifts in the relationship between newspapers and their audiences is in the financial relationship between the two. From 'selling' its audiences to advertisers, newspapers must now turn directly to these audiences for their contribution to the revenue of a publication.

In the absence of a print edition with a cover price – which was once the largest source of revenue for newspapers – and in a space where 'news' is abundantly available from several

[9] The publicly available domain name registries show that the domains for amatomu.com, amagama.com, thoughtleader.co.za and newsinphotos.co.za were all created between January and March 2007, (see whois.com and whois.co.za).

sources, the question of how online generates revenue from direct sales to audiences is, critically, still unanswered.

Over two decades of digital transitions, models to address this altered relationship have ranged from paywalls to subscriptions, and now the membership model.

The *New York Times*, which deployed a significantly successful digital revenue model, harkens back to what I think was South Africa's first membership model – the *Weekly Mail* Society in 1985. A contemporary example of a membership model is the case of the *Daily Maverick*.

Members are money

Membership models are just another way of generating revenue for a news organisation. But there are fundamental differences between this and, for example, a subscription model.

As this case study shows, present-day membership models work in a similar way to the *Weekly Mail* Society by attempting to bring audiences closer to the centre of the organisation, the production of the news, not just by giving of their money, but also their time and expertise.

At the heart of a membership model is a cause to which supporters donate, not a product that they buy. What is meant by this is that membership models seek to leverage support for the news product by appealing to the moral and social conscience of potential audiences.

The Tow Centre for Digital Journalism (Hansen & Goligoski, 2018) provides a definition of the three types of audience revenue models as a useful departure point:

- a donation model, which encourages audiences to give their time or money to an institution in support of a common cause or common values, 'donation' conveying a charitable relationship
- a subscription model, which requires audiences to pay money to get access to a product or service, 'subscription' conveying a transactional relationship, and
- a membership model, which invites audiences to give their time, money, connections, professional expertise, distribution to their networks and/or ideas to support a cause they believe in, 'membership' representing a two-way knowledge exchange between journalists and members – a more committed relationship that is robust and active

Membership models remain the current popular choice. As media organisations grapple with ailing relevance and almost non-existent online advertising revenues, their future is entirely dependent on audiences who need convincing of the relevance of the newspaper daily.

To understand the relationship the *M&G* currently has with its audiences, it is useful to revert to the formation of the *Weekly Mail* Society, established to bring the audience closer to the centre of the production process.

The motivation behind the *Weekly Mail* Society was two-fold: one, to distribute the newspaper to a closed group of people to skirt the relevant laws governing the production and dissemination of such newspapers, and two, to raise capital for the publication of the *Weekly Mail* at its very beginning.

When one examines the membership models of today, the *Weekly Mail* Society is a typical example, although decades ahead of its time.

Membership models are another version of subscription models, but with one key difference – the understanding that the model is not just about making money. Instead, it is about making audiences feel like they are closer to the production of the newspaper. This is not only to secure their financial support, but also to act as a network within which the brand is lauded and trusted.

Membership models, such as the one used by the *Daily Maverick* – which claimed 30 000 members in 2025 – are still in their infancy but bear a strong resemblance to the *Weekly Mail* Society of the 1980s.

Eventing to bring the audience closer to the centre

The *Weekly Mail* also had a public-facing side that readily engaged with its readership and supporters through events. On its first birthday in June 1986, the paper hosted a heated, but much-publicised, debate between Cyril Ramaphosa, in his capacity as the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and Harry Oppenheimer, a symbol of big capital, at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg (Manoim, 1996:52).

The *Weekly Mail* also created a series of 'book weeks' which hosted seminars, presentations and engagements with authors. These co-existed with four annual book supplements in the paper, fashioned along the lines of the *New York Times Book Review*.

'What was astonishing about "book week" was that, in an age of consumerist barbarism, it managed to pack theatres at both the Market in Johannesburg and the Baxter in Cape Town', recalled Manoim (1996:100). Shaun de Waal, a long-standing books editor for the *Weekly Mail*, said, 'I think it was a very good thing to do, because … it got us, and kept us, a lot of readers who were sort of in the academic space, or at least had one foot in the academic space, and that was kind of our core readership'.

This pointed to targeted links between the editorial decisions and events of the *Weekly Mail* (De Waal, 2019).

The *Weekly Mail* Society held events to bring its audience closer to the centre of the organisation. This is the same interactivity that is needed in the present day to get audiences to support the producers of journalism. It relied on individuals and their generosity to fund its start-up as it got on its feet, and the owners quickly realised that courting the audience was a way to sell the product.

The same idea exists today as publications vie for limited audiences.

Many years on, the *M&G* strategy continues to include eventing as a way of attracting audiences and deepening existing relationships. These range from discussions and conferences on issues pertinent to the South African political and economic landscape, such as a conference on the National Health Insurance which aimed to bring 'government, the private and public healthcare sector, professionals, consultants, academia and civil society together to engage, and identify and find solutions to ensure the success of South Africa's biggest healthcare reform system' (Quicket, 2019).

The 'Top 200 Young South Africans' special focus continues to appear annually, inviting public nominations and appearing to have widespread popularity, despite its lack of revenue-generation.

Conclusion

The *Weekly Mail* and the *M&G* were ahead of their time when it came to a digital transition in the South African news industry. The lessons of the *M&G* in its transition to digital remain instructive for many news publications operating in South Africa today.

The recent downshift to print, and to slowing down the pace of publication, means that newsrooms must once again confront their dual publishing strategies to prevent the kind of complications the *M&G* experienced.

Convergence in publication platforms should be represented by convergence among the individuals servicing the various outlets of a news organisation, this being as critical as content convergence.

At a macro level, this case study demonstrates the presence of an ongoing culture of adaptation to new technologies and new contexts which, in the current world of AI and social media platforms, seems to be what is still required in our newsrooms.

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The impact of Big Tech on vernacular publications

A case study: *Isolezwe*

Thulani Mbatha. Editor

The author was born and raised in KwaZulu-Natal and started his career as a journalist as a freelancer for Independent Newspapers' titles the *Post* and *Independent on Saturday* until he moved into sports, which led to him becoming a founding member and sports editor of *Isolezwe* in 2002.

He became the editor in 2005, later moving to become editor of rival paper, the *Sunday Times* and its isiZulu edition, before returning to Independent's stable with *Isolezwe*

Introduction

There's a story that I both enjoy and don't like sharing with my colleagues – the first, because it allows me a reference to tradition and my roots, the second because it throws me headfirst into realities for conventional media in the digital age.

I come from a village called eNhlwathi, some four hours away from the city of Durban where the newspaper I edit, *Isolezwe*, is based.

I visit the village quite regularly, and on one of those occasions not that long ago, I came across Lucky, a retired bus driver who's well-known and popular in the community.

This gentleman supported *Isolezwe* from the time it launched in 2002. Reading the newspaper was a ritual when he was still working, because he had time to read it from page 1 to the sport while waiting for passengers he ferried to the nearest town in the morning and returned home in the afternoon.

Every day's paper also circulated on the bus, and Lucky would then take the copy home to his wife.

We saw each other after a church service in December, and he asked me in Zulu, 'What have you done to us, my boy? What has happened to *Isolezwe*?'

The community is no longer getting the physical newspaper because that area, where I come from, is affected by a reduction in print orders after deliveries there became unsustainable. *Isolezwe* has experienced a substantial decline in print circulation in a decade. In 2014, our circulation was above 100 000 copies, but by the first quarter of 2024, we were around 20 000 – a decrease of more than 80%.

This gentleman used to send me messages whenever something was happening that he believed had a great news angle. He would call and say, 'Have you heard about this? Can *Isolezwe* come and cover it?' And sometimes we would send reporters out there and find unique stories.

That was in part what has made *Isolezwe* special. Relationships like that helped build the reputation of a newspaper which understood even the most unknown villages in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and was committed to revealing people's lives there to the rest of the country.

Viasen Soobramoney, CEO of Independent Online (IOL), told the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry in March 2024, 'When you cover those areas … it begins to give you the real picture of what South Africa is outside of the major cities and small towns and … I think that that's the kind of content we would consistently produce in the past' (Competition Commission, 2024).

Addressing the Competition Commission's panel when Independent Newspapers made its submission, he explained, 'It's no longer the same [even though] we still put some effort into it … It's become much more expensive … because of the kind of capacity that we have in the newsroom … It's become more difficult to actually deploy a resource to an area that's four or five hours away from your office, because that will require … two days [in effect]'.

'We have to invest considerably in [tech], and that investment, … to keep up, impacts on … our print orders and our ability to deliver to the print market.'

In 2019, when Lucky was still getting his newspaper, *Isolezwe*'s circulation was at around 86 000 while the Sunday edition, *Isolezwe ngeSonto* (which launched in March 2008), and the Saturday paper, *Isolezwe ngoMgqibelo* (launched in August 2011), were around 65 000. At the time, *Isolezwe* was the fifth-biggest newspaper in South Africa (Marivate, 2024).

Lucky had a further take on the demise of *Isolezwe* in print, saying, ‘Look, there’s another matter … you know, all we hear about politics in this part of the world now is what we get from radio, and maybe a few politicians who come and tell us their lies. We no longer have Isolezwe telling us the [true] stories’.

That encounter with him touched me. So much so, that I shared it not only with colleagues, but with the commissioners at the Inquiry which Research ICT Africa (RIA) described as ‘one of the most comprehensive investigations globally into how digital platforms impact local media ecosystems’.

Analysing its later Provisional Report, released in 2025, RIA’s Scott Timcke said: ‘Unlike approaches in other jurisdictions that focus narrowly on copyright or competition law, South Africa’s Inquiry connects digital market power to constitutional rights and media diversity.’

‘The Commission’s emphasis on vernacular language media and the public broadcaster demonstrates an understanding that media regulation is not just about market efficiency but about ensuring citizens’ access to diverse, quality information in languages they understand.’ (Timcke, 2025)

Amid the major talking points of South African news media surviving Big Tech, it might have seemed small that an isiZulu newspaper was deeply missed in its constituent rural communities, but to me, its battle told a chapter of the tale of what we, as journalists, may no longer get to do and the audiences we may no longer reach.

It was therefore fulfilling that the Provisional Report highlighted these human consequences, and I like to think my submission, telling the story of Lucky, helped take them to that conclusion.

Lucky had felt a certain isolation when deliveries of *Isolezwe* stopped. A connection to news he trusted was gone. The familiarity he’d experienced through the newspaper – something shared with other isiZulu-speakers – was taken away. So too, that hope or expectation that *Isolezwe* could help solve problems, highlight issues and hone in on and explain politics within his context.

It isn’t that *Isolezwe* has disappeared. We have continued to deliver print copies in certain areas. But, as Mohammed Hoosain, CEO of Independent Newspapers, told the Inquiry, ‘the cost of delivering the newspaper and the cost of producing that newspaper [have] significantly changed over the years’.

‘The actual raw materials of producing that newspaper [have] probably doubled over the last, say, five to six years. And the cost of distributing that newspaper [has] potentially increased quite significantly … On top of that, with the added pressure on … advertising revenue and … with the increase in … cost, it’s proving more and more difficult for [the *Isolezwe*] audience to get the newspaper now.’ (Competition Commission, 2024)

We are fully online, of course, but Lucky, and people like him who'd prefer their news in isiZulu, are often constrained by data costs that would bring it to life on their mobiles – if they are within an area that has reliable Internet, that is.

This is improving. Key South African social media statistics found in the *Global Digital Report* 2025, produced in partnership with Meltwater and We Are Social, found that:

- 50.8m South Africans use the Internet (78.9%)
- 26.7m use social media (41.5%), and
- 124m mobile connections are active (193% of the population)

'As of early 2025, there are over 50m Internet users in South Africa. This is up over 2.5m users from 2024, showing the continued growth of Internet accessibility in the country,' said the report.

'Interestingly, although there are over 50m internet users, only 26.7m are social media users. Although this is up 2.7% year-on-year, it shows how much growth potential is still available to social media platforms.' (Meltwater, 2025)

But as news publishers – vernacular, especially – celebrate opportunities to reach more people online, we are confronted by other challenges.

The classic print media economic model felt 'safe' to those readers just as it did to many journalists, whereas now, there is relatively wide awareness that non-traditional platforms – where 'media' covers a range, from TikTok to WhatsApp groups – may not always be trustworthy.

Isolezwe ('Eye of the Nation') is a 23-year-old brand. In its first decade, it had phenomenal growth in a market where there was only one other player similar to it prior to its launch. Its unique advantage in the market was that it published daily whereas its competitor was bi-weekly.

It then became the world's first isiZulu news site when it went live in 2004. It was of course conventional at that time, as titles began to move some of their assets to the Internet, to use the same content online as the print edition, which we did.

Isolezwe quickly grew as a unique news provider with more than a million page views and followers on Facebook

The Sunday edition, *Isolezwe ngeSonto*, launched in March 2008. The addition of a Saturday paper, *Isolezwe ngoMgqibelo*, in August 2011 completed the circle, making *Isolezwe* a seven-day operation – a feat for a vernacular publication in the South African news publishing industry

After 15 years, *Isolezwe ngeSonto* merged with *Isolezwe ngoMgqibelo* to create *Isolezwe Ngempelasonto*, a weekend edition that rounded up the week's top stories and set the tone for the next few days.

Entirely in isiZulu, *Isolezwe* was not only the largest publication in an African language in South Africa, but across the continent, yet before it attained its 20-year mark, the print title was under significant pressure.

Our publisher, Independent Newspapers, was to see an up to a 60% decline in revenue, with circulation falling across all titles, and a significant drop in print viability. Reduced orders curtailed the geographic reach of *Isolezwe*, and soon, its staff was cut.

IsiZulu is spoken by almost a quarter, 23%, of the population of South Africa, which makes it the most widely spoken language in our country. But here's the thing: it is not properly recognised by Big Tech. This, while *Isolezwe*'s content is taken to build page views.

Our Facebook account was soaring before Meta decided to reduce its share of news publisher link content to audiences in 2024. Our feeds fell. But there's an unusual element to how *Isolezwe* operated in terms of search engine results pages like Google News and Google Discover.

Where other titles may be sacrificed on the altar of Google's Expertise, Authoritativeness and Trustworthiness (EAT) algorithm, out of which Google decides what users should see, our title still surfaces because people who want us go straight to our platform.

Users can now indeed get information from results pages without having to click through to a news title's own content, which has negatively affected publishers' traffic because of decreased visibility and discoverability. That hits revenue. But many of our isiZulu speakers avoid search.

The irony – that people enjoy our content in their mother tongue and seek us out specifically – is that Big Tech still largely ignores an indigenous language publisher like us. If people did not know we already existed, would they find us?

As Soobramoney explained at the Inquiry, 'Over the years – before this algorithmic change, so to speak, from Facebook – *Isolezwe* has done a fantastic job in building a community'.

'When we talk about discoverability, we're talking about … popping up onto people's news feeds, for example, but the community that *Isolezwe* has built has enabled them to sort of lessen the impact … because they have people that come looking for them specifically.

'They have to put in a little bit of an extra effort, but thankfully, they [already] had that community that was built around them, rather than [having to reply only on the] spontaneous discoverability of the content in news feeds.' (Competition Commission, 2024)

Soobramoney told the Inquiry that, on the other hand, the 'biggest contributor to [IOL's] traffic is via search [at] just over 50% … [and] another maybe 20% of that via social, [meaning] around 70 [to] 75% of traffic is in the hands search and social.' (Competition Commission, 2024)

The Competition Commission's Chief Economist, James Hodge, the Inquiry's chairperson, said he found the 'contrast between *Isolezwe* and IOL … quite stark in the sense [that] social media referrals [were] higher [for the former] than search referrals', and that 'two-thirds of those search[es] are coming from people … typing in "*Isolezwe*". So they know where they're going, rather than actually discovering content' (Competition Commission, 2024).

Soobramoney confirmed that news from *Isolezwe* does not otherwise make it on to Google News or Google Discover.

So, our problems are somewhat the same and somewhat different to news titles whose content is, for instance, used to train generative AI engines which benefit from those titles' knowledge and information, without reward or distinction. In our case, our language is considered lower resource and therefore not as dominant in training datasets – which is, absurdly, perhaps, both good and bad.

What is bad without any good, are the effects of Big Tech breaking down the resilience of our print editions as this has had an impact on the culture of reading in the mother tongue. This is because schools whose students are isiZulu-speakers, which used to receive the physical paper, have largely lost access to it.

As we contemplate the impacts of the dominant platforms on news media, ours is a special instance. Ours is not only about a for-profit media enterprise taking strain; it's about the preservation of an indigenous language as a voice for news.

This deeply touches journalists working in one of South Africa's official languages other than English, as they consider their work a fulfilment of a constitutional mandate.

It's important to note that *Isolezwe* stopped relying on its print editions for growth some time ago as we worked on mastering an engaging online strategy. And at whom were we directing our energies? That very audience, the youth, who had benefited from our paper in print.

Isolezwe was the only title within the Independent group with its biggest digital audience in the 25 to 34 age bracket, followed by the 18 to 24s, and then age 45+ readers, and so on. Our online traffic was primarily from KZN (63%) and Gauteng (30%), which we anticipated as the largest numbers of isiZulu speakers are in those provinces.

The shift to digital accompanied the steep decline in print revenue, certainly, but *Isolezwe* did not slough off a targeted readership. We still grieve the tens of thousands of Lucky the bus driver readers, and some of us feel like we betrayed their support for the print version of our paper as we try to build huge numbers online, but we didn't lose in other categories.

Yet, it’s still quite messy out there in terms of audiences and how to find them. and compensation, for a vernacular publication like ours.

Soobramoney put it this way: ‘It’s quite simply a lottery of how your content gets surfaced by Big Tech … You use these platforms to try and generate an audience, but you know you're fighting pretty much with one hand behind your back, especially when it comes to the indigenous language titles like *Isolezwe* online’.

‘It doesn't feature, it's not recognised by Google news, so it's not surfaced by the algorithms which means they have to work extra hard to generate more audiences online than IOL would have to, for example.

‘As publishers, [we] are fighting for … less than 10 percent of the global ad revenue pie because that entire ecosystem is controlled. We don't know the rules of the ecosystem, but it's controlled by the likes of Google and Meta. [And] it's affected all publishers, irrespective of language … because the prioritisation on Facebook has been more around people rather than publications or entities.

‘So, you're more likely to see personal posts surface on your Facebook news feed than you would news.’ (Competition Commission, 2024)

Algorithms, which have been around since Euclid, were introduced into search engines 10 years before *Isolezwe* went online, and from the beginning, these disproportionately favoured global content and English-language content. Thus, vernacular content and vernacular news content, to be specific, was always going to be on the backfoot.

We are having to fight for that recognition at the same time as developing novel content across the platforms because algorithms are not sympathetic to or don’t understand our cause. For Meta, it’s about prioritising posts based on likes and shares, so we have to attract those in isiZulu while English-language news – which is itself deprioritised – already has audiences the size of which we can only dream.

Our SEO strategies are unique to digital media for the fact that these are in isiZulu and must be visible to an audience that wants the cultural nuance within our news. We’re not translating English stories into isiZulu; we’re trying to take news affecting isiZulu speakers – broadly and narrowly – to them.

But as we know, the world of online news isn’t about ‘taking it to them’ the way we did with print; it’s about ‘them’ finding us.

The platforms are barely interested in our vernacular, meaning that as AI language models are being trained and AI is being used for content moderation and recommendation, high-resource languages like English are processed and classified into an echo chamber while a lower-resource language like isiZulu – on which little natural language processing (NLP) and machine learning is done – can be misclassified at the same time as being under-represented.

We’re in a bind. We don’t want Big Tech to treat our news the way it does. But vernacular news publications also have to push for an increase in the data size and a balancing of classification for the nine official South African languages among the 11 which are regarded as ‘low-resourced languages’ (two – English and Afrikaans – are not).

The more isiZulu is used to train datasets, the more space it will gain online. That will help us to have our news and our publications read in our mother tongue, as we intend.

A further decline of any kind in news in our own language will especially affect our rural communities who *are* able to get online. Imagine Lucky trying to get AI to find news using speech recognition in isiZulu. He might. It is there, but it’s not as consistent as English.

This consideration that a publication like *Isolezwe* could help train Big Tech’s products may sound counterintuitive when those companies are not compensating media for its news. But as journalists and media working in the vernacular, we should examine how we can support African NLP projects.

We have to educate our readers and users to increasingly exercise their preference for news in isiZulu so that recommenders will be forced to recognise us. We have to demand localised AI models and be an active part of how that unfolds.

The same struggle is taking place in India, where English news still dominates algorithmic feeds, and if not English, Hindi, meaning news in smaller languages like Tamil doesn’t get much visibility. Much like isiZulu news, poor visibility means lower traffic and ultimately less ability to monetise our content, which impacts our bottom line and justification for existence.

There is significant work being done on NLP, notably by Vukosi Marivate, a Professor of Computer Science and the ABSA Chair of Data Science at the University of Pretoria (UP), who also made inputs to the Inquiry. Marivate was the principal investigator and leader of the Data Science for Social Impact research group at the Computer Science Department at UP, whose general area of work includes local language NLP.

‘These two strands are complementary,’ says the group’s website. ‘Our work in Data Science and Society has allowed us to have a more nuanced approach to understanding the systematic challenges that face being able to do excellent science with local languages’ (DSFSI).

And not only science – media, too.

Among the achievers from UP is Andani Madodonga. who, in his Master’s dissertation for the Department of Computer Science in 2022, described the importance of NLP, which ‘helps the computer or machine to understand conversion between two languages’.

In ‘South African isiZulu and siSwati News Corpus Creation, Annotation and Categorisation’, for his Master’s in Big Data Science, he wrote: ‘NLP can … assist in learning sentiment from sentences or text and this NLP capability is utilised by companies to understand how customers feel and their opinion about the company's products and services through the analysis of their social media posts and comments.' (Madodonga, 2022)

'Most low-resourced languages do not have enough digitised text material and sometimes it is due to the small population size of the people who speak that language, but that is not always the case because … languages that are spoken by a large sized population may not have enough digitised text materials, hence those languages are called low-resourced languages'.

Isolezwe can help transform isiZulu from being a low-resourced language to a higher-resourced language. We need partnerships.

What we don't need or want is AI crawlers which do not have permission to be active on our platforms. Hodge asked about this at the Inquiry, referring to Marivate's submission, that 'news content may be valuable partly for translation'.

Marivate's work advances discussion about indigenous languages and the media, intending to stimulate ever more means to attain viability in media published in African languages.

Taking *Isolezwe* as a case in point, Hodge said 'it's a depository of a large amount of written isiZulu, and some of that content may well be translated, and you have options to look at [that] … Has independent looked at blocking the AI crawlers at this point, or have you put in a policy about how you're going to deal with AI?' (Competition Commission, 2024).

Soobramoney said the company had 'seen a significant increase in these crawlers … popping up here, there and everywhere', to the extent that it had 'put together an AI task team within the group … designated the task of looking at the impact and how we negate or accommodate [it] in some way, shape or form' (Competition Commission, 2024).

Hodge said Google had indicated digital media '[had] the choice of whether to allow the crawler[s] in and .. how big a snippet to provide, if any, [but] do you feel you have a choice?'

Soobramoney said: 'No. We've never had a choice. Never.'

Another example of work being done to emphasise isiZulu online, is the Masakhane Project – a grassroots organisation aimed at strengthening NLP research in African languages.

A community and open-source initiative, it writes: 'Despite the fact that 2 000 of the world's languages are African, African languages are barely represented in technology.' (https://www.masakhane.io/)

'The tragic past of colonialism has been devastating for African languages in terms of their support, preservation and integration. This has resulted in technological space that does not understand our names, our cultures, our places, our history.'

Masakhane (which ‘roughly translates to “We build together” in isiZulu’) focuses on creating open-source tools and datasets for languages like isiZulu, so that Africans ‘[can] shape and own these technological advances towards human dignity, well-being and equity, through inclusive community building, open participatory research and multidisciplinarity’.

Isolezwe was built upon and can learn from many of the principles and values which Masakhane embodies in its work:

- ‘Umuntu Ngumuntu Ngabantu’ (‘a person is a person through another person’ or ‘I am because you are’), which ‘calls for collaboration and participation and community towards [sustainability]’
- ‘Everyone has valuable knowledge – each person’s … experiences have value, and each person is worth listening to, and has something to contribute’
- ‘Responsibility – [believing] that each person in the technology process has an ethical responsibility to what they produce in the world’
- ‘Data sovereignty – [believing] that Africans should be able to decide what data represents our communities globally, retain ultimate ownership of that data, and know how it is used’, and
- ‘Sustainability, which is necessary for societal change, [in this case] by being fully integrated with technological stakeholders to ensure the community continues to thrive into the future’

Lelapa AI's Vulavula API, ‘designed to create customer experiences in … African languages, including isiZulu, … aims to bridge the digital divide by providing tools tailored to African linguistic contexts’, is another example of the work being done within technology which should, essentially, support news in isiZulu is all digital formats.

Vulavula’s tagline – ‘You’re not really going to ghost your customers, are you? Ignoring their language is basically leaving them on “read”. Let’s get you speaking their language (and keeping their business)’ – resonates (https://lelapa.ai/).

Let us re-emphasise how Meta’s feed algorithm changes in 2024, which prioritised content from ‘friends and family’, reducing the emphasis on posts from publishers, led to a decline in the organic reach of news publications, and, were it not for the loyalty of *Isolezwe* seekers, our vernacular news content could have disappeared. By its very nature, it should have been ‘less likely to appear in users' feeds’.

It is also worth noting that *Isolezwe* is not behind a paywall, with Independent having prioritised the importance of making all of its journalism freely available. That was a strategic choice.

But we shift now to the very serious issue of Google not supporting African languages on its Adtech platform. Hodge spoke to that, saying that ‘ad blocking technology can't assess whether [isiZulu advertising] contravenes any particular ad rules’.

‘It also can't translate from English into an African language, and so it's difficult to monetise, at least for advertisers, who wish to reach those markets in their own language.’ (Competition Commission, 2024)

Hoosain substantiated, saying, ‘It is very difficult to generate any sort of digital direct advertising, so the advertising that you sometimes see on the *Isolezwe* platform is mostly programmatic’. The platforms take a cut from programmatic advertising, while direct advertising spells more revenue for the publication.

He noted that online titles ‘try a whole range of things … [such as] content-led projects, sponsored content partnerships, … but [these don’t] come anywhere near the cost of the investment of running … platforms – it just doesn't add up’. Collating the challenge, Hoosain said, ‘our traffic that we work so hard to generate, is used within the Big Tech ecosystem, and they … benefit on the programmatic advertising side as well, so … it's a vicious cycle’ (Competition Commission, 2024).

Hodge summed it up: ‘You're putting a lot of money into the tech to keep up, but you're not getting the return on it, but you're also … having to sacrifice some of the print because of your costs in digital.’ He described it as ‘a sort of paradox’.

‘Budgets include substantial tech development costs,’ said Hoosain, ‘and that comes at the cost of staff, declining distribution areas and declining print orders. So, it's the switch, the switching budgets, that's not stacking up’.

‘The journalism has been completely decimated because we have to switch those budgets. And by switching those budgets, we're declining on our print side, which was our major revenue, and we can't keep up with the tech because, I'll be very blunt, we can't … afford to.’ (Competition Commission, 2024)

There is also the issue of Meta's algorithm rewarding original content to ‘promote authentic user expression’, but with less content visibility – and declining revenue – vernacular media struggles to maintain a public role.

This returns us somewhat to the challenges we faced when our print editions contracted, as the smaller your visibility, the less your role in protecting democracy. If the cultural relevance of our news – and, by default, our isiZulu-speaking audience – is downplayed in the greater media world, our appeal to that specific community may get lost in the swathes of English global content automatically steered their way.

The massive job cuts which eroded our newsroom, naturally compromised our investigative journalism. Retrenchments and restructuring the norm, we inevitably saw content coming in at a lower quality alongside a rise in misinformation.

The hard truth is this: *Isolezwe*'s print circulation fell by 81% over a decade, showing the economic strain caused by, among other things, Big Tech's ad revenue concentration. So, to survive, we continually adapt our content for digital. We know sensational stories are widely read, so we are increasingly faced with a choice between producing more excellence in journalism – which is deprioritised by the platforms – or more of what we would traditionally call 'tabloid'.

There are serious knocks to our efforts

- With mobile penetration at 74%, *Isolezwe* has embraced a mobile-first strategy, but high data costs and connectivity issues still hinder reach, particularly in rural areas
- Social media strategies are effective, with over a million page views and a strong youth demographic, but these gains are offset by algorithm changes and limited ad revenue

This is why vernacular publications must lobby for the enforcement of fair compensation and visibility for our media. We must advocate for transparent algorithms. We must insist our media benefits mutually from Big Tech.

A few months after our submissions to the Inquiry, SANEF organised an Indigenous Languages Seminar 'aimed at addressing the pressing issues surrounding the preservation and promotion of South Africa's indigenous languages within the media landscape'. Its partners were PanSALB and the United Nations South Africa.

The seminar focused on 'sustainable models for growth and inclusivity' with 'a critical takeaway … the necessity of financial investment in indigenous language media, with participants emphasising that commercial imperatives often overshadow cultural preservation' (SANEF, 2024)

'Developing indigenous languages in media requires economic support, which can be realised by attracting advertisers to content produced in these languages and creating opportunities for alternative business models such as community-funded publications.

'Key recommendations include monetising indigenous language media … Advertisers need to be shown the value and reach of indigenous language audiences … [And] educational Initiatives, [including addressing] the skills gap in producing high-quality content in indigenous languages, further ensuring the media's capacity to support linguistic diversity.'

The 'role of AI was seen as both a challenge and an opportunity'. 'While AI could help create tools for translating … in indigenous languages, there is a need for careful governance to ensure these technologies respect linguistic and cultural nuances.'

We won't all always agree.

Professor Petrus Potgieter of the Institute for Technology and Network Economics (whose findings are the result of joint work with Bronwyn Howell of Victoria University in

Wellington, New Zealand, and who is also attached to the Department of Decision Sciences at UNISA), made an oral submission to the Inquiry on the same day as Independent Media and myself.

He had slightly contrary views on some issues for us as news publishers, but his warnings to Big Tech itself were clear.

Potgieter and Howell are Board members of the International Telecommunications Society, regularly speak at the Telecommunications Policy Research conference in Washington and have published jointly and separately on issues related to telecommunications and the media industry.

Potgieter's words about dominant technologies drive me to my point, although it is important to mention his strong reference to the Constitution, which 'makes the following statement about freedom of expression: "Everyone has the right to freedom of expression which includes … freedom of the press and other media" … But it actually applies to everything else … '

'So we do not think the fact that the traditional press, who's referred to in the Constitution, is of specific import other than clearly expressing the intent of the framers of the Constitution that the expression of freedom of expression is a very strong right and it is a right that applies in many areas.' (Commission, 2024)

This is important for us as editors in general. Yet it was Potgieter's reference to the work he did as co-author of two chapters in the book, 'New Concepts for Media Diversity, A View From South Africa', edited by Julie Reid of UNISA, which pertains.

They 'looked at audience data on media consumption and then analysed the audience data with respect to titles as well as ownership, [and] the big picture [was] that all of the media in South Africa have historically been very concentrated especially newspapers … by any measure that you choose'.

Potgieter extrapolated to Big Tech at the Inquiry, saying 'when it comes to the platforms, we acknowledge that online platforms … are highly concentrated … [And] it's also the case that with digital platforms, [that] dominance can easily just disappear'.

His view was that 'AI will soon reduce the dominance of the prominent search engines to a very great extent' and that 'every effort to address that kind of dominance [is] essentially fruitless because the technology and the applications [change] so quickly'.

'[Now] you can just use an appropriate AI tool to ask a question and get a single answer. And that removes the opportunity which the search engines providers have of serving you with advertising content.

'So, it bypasses that search engine application … in favour of a single answer. And it could be that many of the good AI engines are simply going to be paid. So, you'll pay a subscription amount and then they would have monetised the use of the AI engine for search and then it's goodbye … Google … and whatever still exists.' (Competition Commission, 2024)

This is a striking analysis if our concern as vernacular media is too narrowly focused on search and not on AI – and those datasets which currently regard our language of communication for news, isiZulu, as 'low resource'.

Hoosain spoke before me at the Inquiry, explaining how the company has up to 18 titles across print and digital platforms which carry ' legacy … the history of South Africa in our archives' (Competition Commission, 2024).

This is key to tying together our fight for the viability of an indigenous-language publication like *Isolezwe* which is one of the youngest newspapers in the Independent stable. We are building on that legacy.

As I told the panel, 'there was a realisation that there was a big appetite [for *Isolezwe*] from the younger readers', and considering the youthfulness of the title itself, in a stable where there are some publications which are well over 100 years old, we have a certain power within society.

I continued, 'Imagine if the [older] titles were humans and were still alive and you know, a hundred years and older, [they would] be going through all sorts of chronic issues, illnesses'.

'But guess what? *Isolezwe*, at the age of 21, is experiencing similar, chronic issues that the 100 plus years old titles are experiencing and that's all because of Big Tech.' (Competition Commission, 2024)

PanSALB doesn't see us as having 'chronic issues'. In 2024, it awarded *Isolezwe* for its 'exceptional work in language development and [promoting] the use of South Africa's linguistic resources, with a particular emphasis on mother tongue use'. We will take all the encouragement we can get.

I started this case study with Lucky, so I am going to end with Lucky.

Without his physical copy of *Isolezwe*, how is he getting his news in isiZulu?

There's the radio, of course – specifically Inanda FM and Ukhozi FM (one of the biggest Zulu-language stations), and local community stations that broadcast news in isiZulu. There's word of mouth, and the church – where he and I met up – is a compelling environment for the spreading of news.

But *Isolezwe* has a range of plans for Lucky, to meet him where he is at.

It may take Lucky some time to accept the realities of modern media, but the fact that he often relies on his mobile phone to listen to radio news bulletins is an indication that he can make the transition to his trusted *Isolezwe*.

Like his favourite radio station, the publication continues to adapt, and he will have even more on offer than in the print edition. Watch this space.

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AI-Generated Image

Muslim Views and the path to sustainability in a digital age

A case study

Mahmood Sanglay

The author is CEO of *Muslim Views*, an independent community-owned newspaper in Cape Town. He has been a board member of the Association of Independent Publishers, Print and Digital Media South Africa and the Forum for Community Journalism. Sanglay is a media professional with 24 years of experience in journalism, communication and public relations.

Introduction

South Africa's risk for earthquakes is very low, but mountains can shift. That happened on 29 September 1969, when a late-night seismic event measuring 6.3 on the Richter scale shook the Boland, leaving parts of historic Tulbagh in ruins. Nine people, mostly children, were killed as houses collapsed in the town set in a basin of vineyards surrounded by three mountain ranges.

Ninety minutes' drive away, 40 000 funeralgoers were unaware of the terrible news as they finally readied for rest amid the aftershocks of their own momentous shift: the murder two days earlier of Imam Abdullah Haron.

A cleric and the founder and editor of one of the country's most important anti-apartheid newspapers, Haron had spent four months in solitary confinement where he was tortured during daily interrogations.

Some mourners might have heard about the earthquake by midnight if they had telephones in their houses, and family in the winelands. But their thoughts were likely still captured by the emotion of the community's walk to lay Haron to rest at the Mowbray Muslim Cemetery.

If 'an important consequence' of the tragedy in Tulbagh was realised through technology – specifically, 'the establishment of the South African National Seismograph to monitor earthquakes, assess hazards, and guide efforts to mitigate the risk' (Durrheim, 2019) – so, too, has been the purpose afforded Haron's community newspaper, *Muslim News*, in the digital age.

Haron's impact as a leader is well-evidenced and some of it, documented, although it is not yet visible enough in the national Struggle narrative. His influence as the founding editor of *Muslim News* requires greater analysis, too, but his resilience is what inspires its successor, *Muslim Views*, in this era in which information is a commodity.

The original newspaper first appeared on 16 December 1960, the year of the Sharpeville massacre and the banning of the ANC and other anti-apartheid organisations. During its 26 years of giving voice to the marginalised, 21 editions were banned.

Muslim News was subjected to a forced closure in 1986 by members of the Sayed family, 17 years after Haron was killed. However, the editor, Farid Sayed, remained determined to continue publishing, and the closure of one title opened the way for the launch of another. *Muslim Views* was first published in September 1986 with him as its founding editor.

For almost 40 years, the publication has significantly deepened its legacy of values-based, independent and professional journalism.

Indonesian scholars Ahmad Salman Farid et al write that, 'In the contemporary media landscape, where journalism plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, it becomes imperative to analyse how Islamic values are communicated through the lens of ethical journalism'. (Farid, 2024)

Their work investigates 'the application of Islamic theology and ethical principles in values-based journalism, emphasising the role of media in reflecting and shaping societal norms; rooted in the premise that journalism, when guided by ethical principles and theological considerations, can serve as a bridge for intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding'.

Similarly, *Muslim Views* supports such a premise, its mandate in keeping with the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) Act of 2002 description of 'community media' as 'media projects owned and controlled by a community (geographic or interest group) where financial surplus is reinvested in the project'. (Presidency, 2002)

Making a case for independent journalism in Islam

The notion of independent journalism in Islam remains, curiously, a distant and unfamiliar concept. Across much of the Muslim world, traditions of free media, public interest reporting, freedom of expression, and codified media ethics are either absent or weakly developed.

Yet, this reality stands at odds with the very principles of the Quran and the Sunnah, which uphold truth, justice, and accountability. In a world where information profoundly shapes societies, Muslim communities must reimagine their relationship with journalism, not as an import, but as a natural extension of Islamic ethical obligations.

Several developmental premises help frame this urgent case. First, there is a clear deficit among Muslims in appreciating the critical role that independent journalism can play in advancing justice and informed civic life. Second, Muslim ownership of independent media remains alarmingly scarce, resulting in a dearth of professional, ethical journalism within the ummah (the global Muslim community). Yet, given that the Muslim community is a global one, there exists an extraordinary opportunity: a truly independent Muslim media could reach audiences across continents, building bridges of understanding rooted in shared values and diverse experiences.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, an epistemological void persists. Research on the role of independent journalism in Islam is limited, hindered by the lack of a Maqasid framework—an ethical-legal approach that prioritises human welfare, justice and the protection of rights.

Without this foundation, the Muslim world struggles to articulate a vision for journalism that aligns with its highest principles.

At *Muslim Views*, we seek to fill this void, adapting to the digital age by committing to platforms that provide information, analysis, and advocacy firmly anchored in universal values and the pursuit of social justice.

Five ways *Muslim Views* stays rooted, while adapting to seismic shifts in publishing

1 To be sustainable, a community newspaper needs a strong circle of support

Haron and a group of close friends established the progressive Claremont Muslim Youth Association (CMYA) in 1958, and the CMYA went on to publish a monthly bulletin, the *Islamic Mirror*, in 1959. During that year, Haron and others decided to establish a monthly newspaper, *Muslim News*.

Muslim Views continued that tradition by ensuring the paper remains independent, free of private and public sector control, and free of undue influence, especially from the Muslim clergy.

2 Sustainability is implied in a clear definition of purpose, and the commitment to that

'Haron … used the opportunity [of editing *Muslim News*] to make the paper as representative as possible. It covered cultural, religious, and political issues. The newspaper played a very functional role in that it kept Muslims informed about Islamic issues taking place in the Cape, other parts of South Africa, and in the Muslim heartlands' (Haron, 2021).

Muslim Views continued to maintain this vital balance between religion, culture and politics. The editorial team of *Muslim Views* has always been particularly conscious of striking a careful balance between faith and practice in publishing news and other content of interest to its audience.

Hence, the cultural and religious life of our audience is never divorced from our political realities, and social justice is always an editorial priority.

3 Sustainability requires a clear understanding of the nature of a publication – for profit, or nonprofit – and to develop on that basis

Muslim Views is the flagship publication of The Compass NPC, a nonprofit registered with the South African Companies and Intellectual Property Commission. As a nonprofit, *Muslim Views* is eligible to receive donations to fund its mission of independent public-interest journalism.

This means the publication is no longer limited to advertising as a sole source of revenue. A registered nonprofit is legally and ethically entitled to reach out to its audience and other institutions for support, including donations and public and private funding.

4 Sustainability demands the right forms of governance, and, to avoid confusion, the appropriate representation therein

Historically, *Muslim Views* has operated with a relatively insular governance model, without much engagement with the broader industry and key news and media institutions. Although editorial independence was largely upheld, occasional interference from board members highlighted the need for greater structural transparency and inclusivity.

There were instances of board members blocking the publication of content they deem disagreeable, despite the content meeting religious, ethical and regulatory and legal standards. Unfortunately, these are precedents for self-censorship, which undermines editorial independence and integrity.

5 Sustainability is bolstered through careful external partnerships

The decision to join the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) in 2006 was a turning point. It opened access to industry bodies such as SANEF, the Press Council of South Africa, the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Communications and the Human Rights Commission. This growing visibility enabled the publication to be recognised as a credible and principled voice among community newspapers.

A business model, disrupted

Muslim News and *Muslim Views* have a combined history of publishing for almost 65 years.

Muslim News was published for 26 years, from December 1960 to August 1986, and an estimated 670 fortnightly editions of the newspaper saw the light of day. *Muslim Views* launched in September 1986 and has published 478 monthly editions to date (as at June 2025) over nearly 40 years.

This record of publishing 1 148 editions of the two titles is unique. There is no other independent Muslim newspaper with a similar record of sustained publishing for over 65 years. This is unparalleled in South African media history. *Al Qalam* is the other Muslim newspaper, first published in 1973, but not entirely independent as it is affiliated with the Muslim Youth Movement.

Farid Sayed, who served on the editorial board of *Muslim News* and was founding editor of *Muslim Views* in 1986, explains that 'the years that span the existence of the two newspapers cover an exciting period in our history from the repression of the apartheid era, to the dawn of democracy and the challenge of establishing social justice in one of the most unequal societies on earth' (Sanglay, 2017).

'The two titles are also unique in that they can claim to have covered for over half a century the challenges and the triumphs of the Muslim community – particularly in Cape Town – for an unbroken period.'

But while the business model – to publish in print, first on a fortnightly basis, then monthly as a for-profit entity – held steady for more than 50 years, it started to take strain in the mid-2010s as South African media in general began to experience the real impacts of digital on the future of print.

This happened against the backdrop of print media, under the auspices of what was then called Print and Digital Media South Africa (PDMSA), responding to government's criticism that the industry had, broadly, responded inadequately to findings of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) after it held hearings in 2000 into racism within the sector.

'The HRC was in pursuit of interrogating a fundamental perception that media, after six years into a non-racial democracy, was still racist … [and so] print media … began facing the challenges of living up to being the embodiment of a new South Africa …

'This new focus on transformation of the newsrooms and content, engendered by the HRC hearings, positively influenced journalists and to a certain extent also impacted on consumers.'

But Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Communications decided this transformation was incomplete, and held its own hearings, culminating in a directive to the MDDA and the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) that the PDMSA needed to produce change, urgently. A Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTTT) was then set up in 2013 by the media itself.

In its submission to the PDMTTT, *Muslim Views* outlined its 53-year journey as an independent, grassroots publication committed to social justice and constitutional rights such as freedom of expression and cultural community development. The paper detailed the severe constraints it faced under apartheid, its relaunch in democratic South Africa, and its continued resilience in an unequal media landscape.

Muslim Views identified key challenges, including market monopolies by corporate-owned 'community' titles, exclusion from advertising revenue streams, inadequate state support through agencies like the MDDA and the Fibre Processing and Manufacturing Sector Education and Training Authority (FP&M SETA), and barriers to transitioning from print to digital platforms.

It further urged targeted transformation policies, equitable resource allocation and recognition of ownership as a defining feature of authentic community media.

It is worth noting that in 2016, *Muslim Views* raised a serious complaint against Media24 following the launch of *Modest Muse*. We believed that this new Media24 publication was a direct threat to our survival. *Modest Muse* entered the same community space we had faithfully served for decades, targeting our readers, advertisers, and even our writers.

Despite Media24's claim that it was promoting media diversity, ownership of *Modest Muse* remained firmly in corporate hands, undermining true transformation as outlined in the PDMTTT report.

Although Media24 publicly said it wasn't competing with us, internal discussions showed it was fully aware that its actions could hurt *Muslim Views*. We saw the launch of *Modest Muse* as an attack on independent, community-owned media, especially by a corporation with an apartheid past. We considered launching a community awareness campaign to highlight the real threat Media24 posed to our future.

Our fears were allayed, however, as *Modest Muse* ceased publication about six months after it was launched.

The PDMTTT report, published in 2013, included a number of recommendations, including identifying 'digital media as the new game changer for transformation, and a frontier of media development that is going to serve as a key leveller for communities presently excluded from national discourse' (Team, 2013).

'If we therefore turn our attention seriously to digital as the empowering platform, using either online, phones or tablets, we can deal with the limitation created by 65% of the population having little access to mainstream print media,' said the report.

It believed that 'with growing usage [would] come advertising, and with it, profitability', as, at that time, 'digital already [drew] 3% of the total R34-billion ad spend in South Africa, compared to print taking 29%, television 47%, radio 15% and out of home 5%'.

But this was not to be for *Muslim Views* – until decisive action was able to be taken after the near-catastrophic interventions of loadshedding and the pandemic.

The three waves of disruption:

- the migration of advertising from print to online platforms
- the rise of social media, an existential threat to the survival of professional news media and 'citizen journalism', undermining professional standards, and
- Big Tech's dominance, with Google and Meta usurping both traffic and revenue from traditional media

These forces, compounded by economic recession, severely impacted *Muslim Views*. By 2020, even the once-lucrative Ramadan print edition had shrunk from 88 pages in 2012 to just 48. Today, regular issues average 24 pages.

Mounting debts and pressure from service providers had already forced the board to consider selling its most valuable asset – its property – and consider offers from potential buyers in 2023.

In 2018, *Muslim Views* had even ventured into travel services in an attempt to diversify income, but also as a novel way to try to strengthen its nascent digital presence. A successful tour to Türkiye was followed by a planned second trip in March 2020, but that was cut short by the onset of Covid-19 which saw travel revenue evaporate and mosque closures halt print circulation.

Meanwhile, the *Muslim Views* website was dysfunctional, and it had a near-non-existent social media footprint.

The absence of consistent funding had severely restricted hiring capacity, leaving much of the content production to the editor and CEO themselves.

Recognising the existential threat, a digital transformation began in earnest in 2021. Falling advertising revenues and declining print readership left the organisation with no choice but to shift focus, editorially, to the digital realm.

Print's decline could not be reversed, but digital offered a lifeline.

The PDMTTT noted in 2013 that 'the number of Internet users in South Africa grew rapidly from 8,9m in 2011 to 12,8m in 2012, [with] the total number of … users … forecasted to increase at 27,3% compounded to 29,8m in 2016, mainly led by the explosion of mobile broadband via smartphones.

That forecast was correct, with about 29.3m users in 2016, representing 54% of the population (ITU, 2017). In 2020, when *Muslim Views* was at its lowest point in terms of survival projections, there were 36.54m Internet users in South Africa – an increase of 1.1m (3.1%) between 2019 and 2020 – and Internet penetration was at 62% (DataPortal, 2020)

Today, there are 50.8m individuals using the Internet in South Africa – as at the start of 2025 – with online penetration standing at 78.9% (DataReportal, 2025)**.**

Funding realities and new approaches

Muslim Views had always been reluctant to pursue MDDA funding or programmatic advertising. Funding applications at the MDDA are unnecessarily laborious and the pool funds available to print media is significantly less than that for radio. In addition, there have been concerns about the MDDA's management and governance, including allegations of misallocation of funds and lack of support for certain publishers affected by unfair competition.

These issues hinder the agency's ability to fulfill its mandate effectively and support a diverse and inclusive media landscape in South Africa. Hence, we avoided MDDA funding applications.

Programmatic advertising poses significant challenges for small publishers, mainly due to the dominance of large tech platforms like Google and Meta, which capture most of the digital ad revenue. These platforms act as both intermediaries and competitors, leaving smaller publishers with minimal returns despite producing valuable content.

The opaque nature of the programmatic ad supply chain also means that much of the revenue is lost to intermediaries before it reaches the publisher. Additionally, small outlets often lack the technical capacity and scale to optimise their inventory or attract high-paying advertisers, making them increasingly reliant on unstable or insufficient income streams that threaten their sustainability.

Although these issues compounded our challenges and raised further doubts about our sustainability, I remained averse to closure.

In 2023, AIP organised a trip to Ohio University's EW Scripps School of Journalism for three weeks to learn about media sustainability and to spend time with American small publishers, but while the programme offered general insights, it lacked tailored support for individual publishers.

A more fruitful outcome emerged from an additional week in Washington DC, where I proposed a partnership to the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) whose main interest is on 'carrying out evidence-based research in advancing education in Muslim societies, and the dissemination of this research through publication and translation, teaching, policy recommendations and strategic engagements' (IIIT, n.d.).

That meeting led to funding for *Muslim Views* for a special editorial feature that, in turn, drew interest from institutions in Canada, Türkiye and the UK. Our proposal included innovative multimedia content of mutual interest that offers with innovative ways of repurposing and repackaging multimedia content that meets two vital criteria: high news value and high public interest value.

For example, a proposal to IIIT was to repurpose an IIIT academic paper on Muslim intellectual history into one on African Muslim intellectual history – meaning we repackaged a dry academic work into a visually appealing and powerful infographic. IIIT found the proposal appealing and funded it in the amount of $1 000. The result was a useful directory of African Muslim intellectuals and an infographic of Africa, mapping the key figures in the directory[10].

Similar successful funding partnerships, yielding an average of $2 500 each, resulted from reaching out to several other key institutions locally and internationally. The following is a selected list of organisations (with footnoted links to the special multimedia features published):

- the Palestine Solidarity Committee (South Africa)[11]
- the Imam Haron Foundation (South Africa)[12]
- the International Council of Indian Muslims (US)[13]
- Media Review Network (South Africa)[14]
- Lawyers for Palestine (South Africa)[15]
- Basira Education (Türkiye)[16]
- Muslim Societies, Global Perspectives (Queens University, Canada)[17], and the
- International Quran Research Association (US)[18]

[10] See https://muslimviews.co.za/african-muslim-intellectual-history/ and https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/MV-202310-Nov-Spread-AMIH-hi.pdf
[11] See https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/MV-202305-May-2023-Nakba-Supplement-LO-1.pdf
[12] See https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Imam-Haron-Infographic.pdf
[13] See https://muslimviews.co.za/the-parallels-between-zionism-and-hindutva/
[14] See https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Myths-HiRes.pdf
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[16] https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Basira-comp-20240308-HiRes.pdf
[17] https://muslimviews.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Islamophobia-Apr-2024-HiRes.pdf
[18] https://muslimviews.co.za/sura-al-anbiyaa-2130-the-origin-of-the-universe-or-the-creation-of-the-solar-system/

Reinvention through crisis

In 2021, after I was appointed CEO, I initiated a gradual but comprehensive overhaul of the publication. The board approved a mandate for transitioning to a hybrid print and digital business model, diversification of revenue streams and monetising platforms like the website, a newsletter and podcasts.

I also introduced multiple projects, like the special editorial features and research partnerships with both public and private sector entities.

- **City of Cape Town: the Wudu Water Conservation Project**

The water conservation partnership enabled us to explore Solutions Journalism, which is an innovative approach to the profession. This is a rigorous, evidence-based approach to reporting in response to societal problems. It involves investigation of a newsworthy problem and an immersive and solutions-driven approach to the problem.

The result is a compelling narrative that at times offers hope and closure, or at least a solution, to the problem.

Muslim Views, in alignment with the City's dedication to water sustainability and climate resilience, proposed a pilot project to address water usage in mosques – with a specific focus on ablution practices – as a meaningful contribution to broader climate action efforts.

The initiative aims to begin with collecting and analysing water consumption data at selected mosques to establish baseline metrics, followed by profiling usage patterns such as attendance frequency and congregation sizes to contextualise water demand.

Alongside data-driven insights, the project seeks to raise awareness about water conservation by integrating Islamic teachings on resource stewardship with civic environmental responsibilities. Additionally, it will explore innovative behaviour-change interventions to advance wudu water recycling practices, testing practical solutions to reduce waste.

Finally, the project will synthesise findings through public interest reports and multimedia content designed to inform congregants, engage communities, and influence policy reforms and sustainable public behaviour.

- **Islamic/halal enterprise: a national Islamic schools quiz**

Muslim Views proposed such an annual quiz to promote Islamic knowledge, general education, civic awareness and ethical values among South African Muslim youth, while leveraging our media reach to enhance community engagement.

The competition, a private partnership, was set to pilot in September 2025, targeting Grades 8 to 11 learners in public and independent schools in the Western Cape, with plans to expand nationally in 2026 to provinces like Gauteng and KZN.

Structured for preliminary online and in-person rounds, and live face-to-face finals, the initiative hoped to integrate multimedia exposure through *Muslim Views'* print edition, digital platforms, community radio and branded educational resources.

By fostering intellectual development, media literacy, and school recognition, the project hoped to offer sponsors strategic visibility in the halal economy, aligning with ethical branding and corporate social responsibility through targeted marketing to families and youth.

The competition aimed to blend edutainment with community development, reinforcing *Muslim Views*' mission while inspiring career aspirations and civic responsibility among participants.

The darkest hour …

The period 2020 to 2023 was perhaps the darkest for many businesses, locally and internationally. For *Muslim Views*, it meant the disruption of our print edition distribution. Mosques were closed during the Covid-19 lockdown, and the flight of print advertisers escalated. This was compounded by a peak in loadshedding – South Africa's notoriously frequent energy outages – in 2023.

These disruptions squeezed our resources to the extreme, compelling the reduction of both our page count and print orders, the key metrics in our sole revenue source. Like everyone else, we tightened our belts and sought innovative means to survive.

For almost all news media publishers, digital was the answer. Yet we knew we had to carve out our own unique solution as there was – and is – no silver bullet in the news media industry, especially in the local community news media sector. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for its diverse players.

Monetise, monetise, monetise! But how? A series of special editorial features was one answer. Vital partnerships with public and private sector entities, like the City of Cape Town, and businesses trading in the local and global Islamic economy, remain exciting opportunities for revenue based on mutual value propositions, and confirm that content is king.

Muslim Views meanwhile made the crucial decision to register as a nonprofit in 2023.

Appointment of a new web developer

In 2024, a multi-skilled designer was brought on board to modernise the publication's online, social media and video offerings. He was hired to undertake a complete overhaul of the website, which lacked visual appeal and design flair. The new designer also significantly enhanced the site's functionality, user experience and security.

The changes included expanding our archives, diversifying multimedia content, enabling advertising revenue and integrating tools for donation payments. And while the impact on our budget was significant, the cost-benefit was there: the appointee came with a diversity of skills which collectively cost us less than hiring multiple talents.

Partnerships

Partnerships were explored with larger media groups sharing similar values and objectives. One such partnership was with two news organisations – *GroundUp* and the *M&G* – with which we shared content and pursued investigative journalism assignments relevant to our respective audiences.

Muslim Views initiated these investigative projects, researched the background and provided the relevant leads and networks. But due to our lack of resources, we rely on media partners such as these for human resources and funding of some aspects of investigations. In these cases, our stories would be published contemporaneously on our respective platforms.

Another partner, a broadcaster seeking Cape Town expansion, initiated podcast collaboration discussions. Meanwhile, a nascent podcasting operation launched, despite technical and distributional limitations.

The broadcaster had an interest in our audience and was looking for a presence in Cape Town. I reached out to one of its directors and proposed a collaborative series of projects in producing podcasting content in the halal food and finance market. It was this opportunity where our interests converged. The director expressed an interest in the proposal, and we would set out to formalise the agreement.

It would, *inter alia*, cover the liabilities of *Muslim Views*, the non-negotiable independence of the publication, job security of full-time staff and sustaining our print edition.

Among the priorities of the deal with the new investor in *Muslim Views* would be building our digital platforms, including our podcasting capabilities and the distribution of our content across multiple platforms.

Podcasting

The team worked with AIP to arrange training workshops on podcast production – from storytelling and interviewing to technical editing, digital marketing and monetisation.

Training workshops in podcast production have empowered other community media organisations to transition from print-first to hybrid models by equipping teams with the skills to repurpose traditional content into engaging audio narratives. Content depth is essential, but so is professional quality.

Monetisation strategies

These include sponsorships, audience donations and premium content, which may offer opportunities for sustainable income and complementing traditional ad revenue.

This combined approach promotes community engagement across generations and can future-proof *Muslim Views* by meeting audiences where they consume media.

Our existing print audience is routinely notified of our web content, and we prepared our strategy for formally introducing our newsletter and social media content.

Print, online and social media audiences are largely independent and disparate, shaped by distinct demographics, consumption habits and trust levels. Print media attracts older audiences who value credibility and in-depth content (Pew Research Center, 2021), while online media appeals to younger, tech-savvy users seeking quick, accessible news (Reuters Institute, 2023).

Social media audiences are fragmented, with platforms like TikTok and Facebook catering to different age groups and preferences, though trust in social media remains low (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023).

These differences highlight the need for tailored strategies to engage diverse audiences effectively. This strategy is important when marketing content, especially on social media. Hence, the importance of maintaining our print edition as a trusted brand that should ideally be referenced by our online and social media platforms.

An important priority for our journalists is to produce multimedia content that is anchored in print but proliferates on social media. A social media post by *Muslim Views* must convey credibility and trust, by virtue of its brand association with a legacy print platform.

We are not yet setting targets, but I see this as a means of persistently building our platforms using standard industry metrics. Among the priorities for a new investor's capitalisation programme would be the appointment of, *inter alia*, social media marketing service providers to build our platforms.

Fortunately, our traditional print audience remains loyal, and there has been no evidence of adverse responses to the development of those.

Seeking sustainability through the hybrid model

Muslim Views has the following attributes:

- a monthly print edition
- regular online content, introduced in 2023
- a weekly newsletter (launched in February 2024)
- irregular content on social platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), and
- weekly podcasts on Islamic finance and occasional thematic episodes

Today *Muslim Views* is exploring multiple revenue streams from, and through

- sponsored editorial features
- ethical web advertising
- podcast sponsorship
- merchandise
- limited-edition print products
- hardcopy home deliveries, and
- donations (to *Muslim Views* as a nonprofit)
- potential partnerships with South African municipalities

Collaborations

Meanwhile, our collaborative journalism efforts continue, this referring to 'journalistic practices in which individuals and organisations work together to create, publish and disseminate news stories'.

'This can be between journalists within the same organisation, or between different media organisations, journalism schools, nonprofit organisations and freelance journalists' (Montclair, n.d.).

'Small newsrooms may find collaborative journalism especially beneficial. With limited resources and manpower, joining forces with others can enable you to cover larger stories, reach a wider audience, and share resources and expertise. It can also facilitate innovation and diversity in storytelling.'

Examples of the investigative journalism collaborations *Muslim Views* has pursued, include:

- an inquiry into alleged financial and building irregularities linked to a local educational institution, and

- an investigation into possible corrupt practices in the supply chain and contents of bottled 'holy water' distributed in South Africa as well as internationally

The subjects for these stories were under investigation at the time this guide was being produced, and therefore, details of the investigation could not be disclosed, but investigative stories of this nature offer exceptionally high news and public interest value.

In addition, they offer unique opportunities for collaboration with more accomplished news organisations and a potential reach to national and international audiences.

User-generated content (UGC

Muslim Views is not reliant on citizen journalism, but we are increasingly sourcing content that broadly meets the criteria of high news and high public interest value. In addition, we regularly publish community – or UGC – content. Most such contributors are unpaid but motivated by the publication's reputation.

Our interaction with many of the feature writers who have contributed to the paper for years – and in some cases, decades – indicates they are motivated by the paper's legacy of professional and independent journalism, and the reputation of *Muslim Views* as a credible brand and a trusted source of information, comment and analysis.

Some of these contributors are academics, high-ranking executives and professionals, and some are community leaders. Among our longstanding writers are Dr Cassim D'Arcy, Dr Salim Parker, Professor Aslam Fataar and Professor Suleman Dangor. More recently, Dr Ismail Lagardien and Dr Nazli Domingo-Salie have also joined our cohort.

Of the six, only two are paid for their work, mainly because they write professionally and depend on their writing as a means of income.

However, we also encourage contributions from ordinary members of the community. Often, these contributions are in the form of letters to the editor. We attach special value to this type of content because it is authentic, reflects the pulse of our community and maintains a vital connection with our most loyal, historical target audience.

Invariably, that is also the target audience of our advertisers.

Therefore, we cannot alienate this audience or disregard their decades-long loyalty to the print edition of *Muslim Views*. In this way, UGC, including that which emanates from community organisations, adds value and relevance.

Advocacy

Advocacy remains central to the publication's mission. While social justice is a core focus, *Muslim Views* also supports broader causes aligned with universal values and inclusive development.

Historically, since the founding of *Muslim News*, the publication has prioritised its advocacy role, as a paper dedicated to universal value and social justice. It is noteworthy, though, that our formal mission statement, approved by the *Muslim Views* board, was issued only in September 2014: '*Muslim Views* is an independent media organisation using contemporary media to provide information, comment and analysis and to advocate universal values and social justice.'

This statement is an indication that we deem Islamic values and universal values as broadly consistent and compatible. Hence, *Muslim News* and *Muslim Views* have always shown deference and respect for all faiths.

It is essential for community media, like us, to pay attention to key metrics, including:

- monthly recurring revenue
- newsletter subscriber growth
- podcast sponsorships
- website traffic
- grants and philanthropic income, and
- community engagement

A roadmap for the future: business development strategy (2025 to 2027)

To transition into a sustainable hybrid publication for its community on the broadest level, *Muslim Views* will have to focus on the following strategic pillars:

Cementing its core identity, through

- emphasising its legacy, using the history of the paper and the values that resonate with all audience segments, locally and internationally
- emphasising its independence, and
- building stronger ties with international audience segments through content that addresses common, universal issues and values, on the one hand, and issues that are unique, to local audiences over the world.

Membership-based revenue, through

- launching a 'Friends of *Muslim Views*' programme with tiered benefits, and
- integrating donation appeals across platforms

Diversified income, via

- ethical native advertising
- podcast sponsorship
- merchandising
- home delivery, and
- seeking grants through philanthropic networks

Digital capacity, using

- the publishing of daily content
- a TikTok and Instagram video strategy
- the newsletter for growth, and
- Search Engine Optimisation

Collaborations and partnerships, especially with

- citizen journalists (UGC)
- municipalities
- larger outlets, through striking editorial alliances, and
- international partners, such as institutions that share its vision

Human capital and improved governance, by

- upskilling contributors, and
- renewing and diversifying the board

Mitigating the impacts of AI and Big Tech, by

- avoiding reliance on Meta and Google
- developing an ethical AI policy, and
- advocating for fair media policies through national forums

Muslim Views has already recognised the severe risks of reliance on platforms like Meta and Google. To mitigate the impacts of digital, we should prioritise building direct relationships with our audiences by expanding our newsletter audience and content, podcast platforms and home delivery services, thereby reducing reliance on platforms for traffic and revenue.

We should also develop an Ethical AI policy rooted in Islamic and universal values, ensuring that AI tools are used only to assist, not replace, human journalism, with full transparency and human editorial oversight to safeguard trust and integrity.

Additionally, we must actively advocate for fair media policies through participation in national forums such as SANEF, and the MDDA, lobbying for the regulation of Big Tech, fairer revenue sharing, greater algorithmic transparency and increased support for independent, community-owned media.

These three strategies

- direct engagement
- ethical AI adoption, and
- proactive advocacy

are essential for sustaining our independence, credibility, and mission in the digital era.

Conclusion

Muslim Views is evolving from a defiant voice of the past to a dynamic media platform for the future. As it claims its space in an ever-shifting digital economy, the publication is a model of resilience, relevance and reinvention rooted in enduring values.

The embrace of technology – from podcasts to multimedia storytelling – and the growing support from investors and a revitalised board have infused *Muslim Views* with energy and vision. Partnerships with public institutions and global allies further affirm it as a beacon for principled, independent journalism.

As we navigate this future, we are not merely adapting; we are reimagining our role in society – building bridges across generations, reaffirming our advocacy for universal values and inspiring new audiences with the timeless power of ethical journalism.

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Staying on air: the story of community stations Radio 786 and Perfect fm

A case study

Thabang Pusoyabone
General Secretary of the National Community Radio Forum

Introduction

Few radio stations start with such an upsurge of support from a target community that viability seems assured. In the case of Radio 786 in Cape Town, its own statistics say there were 250 organisations from civil society, religion and business and 66 000 individuals who 'willed' it to life.

The station started broadcasting on 100.4fm to the greater Cape Town metropolitan area for a mere three hours a day. Now, via online streaming, it can communicate with listeners from more than 100 countries worldwide, 24/7.

But the backing for its motto, 'Inform, educate, uplift!', does not mean it hasn't been through significant challenges – from sharing its frequency, to politics, to technical crises. Viability has always been at the forefront, and so it remains until this day.

That is also the case for Limpopo-based community station Perfect Radio, broadcasting on 104.5fm and on its website at perfectradio.co.za, although it presents a different picture. Established in 2021 to strengthen community development by harnessing the power of digital media, its studios are not 'top-end broadcast systems … with the design space to produce and develop fresh and dynamic approaches to broadcasting', as it now is with 786.

Perfect Radio broadcasts out of a community hall in Ga-Mokwakwaila village in Modjadjiskloof. The village is not a 'forgotten' place, among others being the site of the Modjadji Queenship Restoration ceremony in 2018 for young Balobedu Queen Masalanabo Modjadji V11, Africa's first officially recognised queen (Times, 2025). But it has many struggles, including against poverty and violence, and its community radio station is at the heart of covering its stories.

While Perfect Radio may not yet have the financial resources of 786, being 26 years younger, it is, however, less likely than the Cape Town station to face the kind of political and social backlash that can also threaten sustainability. For this case study, I spoke to both to find commonalities and assess how these promote viability for our community radio in the age of Big Tech.

Behind the scenes is the work done by the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), among others to influence policies for a conducive environment for community broadcasters such as these.

The original guidelines for community radio stations in South Africa were clear, falling as they did under the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) Act of 1993, as amended, which said such a broadcasting service had to be 'fully controlled by a non-profit entity and carried on for non-profitable purposes', had to 'serve a particular community' and should 'encourage members of the community served by it … to participate in the selection and provision of programmes to be broadcast'.

It 'may be funded by donations, grants, sponsorships or advertising or membership fees, or any combination …'.

Not much has changed about those guidelines, but there have been some improvements for community radio since then, although it's never been plain sailing. Viability is a constant quest.

An event at Vygieskraal Stadium in Rylands Estate, Athlone, in Cape Town, launched Radio 786 in September 1995 with a live audience of 30 000. First awarded a temporary licence, which was later extended under the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) Act of 2000, the station knew an enthusiastic Muslim community had its back. That said, the same community also had the back of another radio station, but more about that shortly.

Radio 786 was inspired by the legacy of struggle hero, Imam Abdullah Haron, who was killed in police detention in 1969 for being a leader of the anti-apartheid movement, becoming a beacon for Islamic organisations in the mother city.

It was founded by the Islamic Unity Convention (IUC) which was launched in March 1994 to gather dozens of Muslim organisations under one nonprofit tent. And while there were those who might question how a radio station could be set up by such a body, this was allowed because South Africa endorses the fundamental right of freedom of religion.

Perfect Radio started 26 years later in a post-democratic environment where the oldest listening generation which was still active for 786 in 1995, had been surpassed by another which had experienced apartheid but was still young enough to enjoy democracy, and their children – the Born Frees and beyond.

When 786 started, there was no hint yet of digital radio. If you didn't have batteries, you couldn't listen. That was it. In Perfect Radio's world – with its founder and station manager Raymond Selowa setting it up as digital from the beginning – it's all about data, and battery life, of course.

By 2021, Perfect Radio was primed to be a 'true' community station because a 'huge gap' had developed around coverage of news in the rural areas. This is the way Selowa – who was born in and raised around the town of Tzaneen – described it. He believed he had no choice but to ‘close that information gap’, as mainstream media was only focused on towns and cities.

He knew it was going to be hard work, as previous attempts by other broadcasters at sustaining community radio, had shown. Many were out of business, while Radio 786 – which had been on air for more than two decades – had proved that starting out with more secure financial backing from the very community to whom you intend broadcasting, was essential.

In its case, under the IUC, it had a framework. The IUC described how its ‘assets, income and donations do not belong to its members or office bearers and shall be used to carry out the aims and objectives of the [organisation]’. This would cover how it ‘established, developed and managed‘ Muslim electronic media, including Radio 786 (IUC, 2017).

Essentially, ‘Such electronic media … shall have an independent editorial policy [meaning] no component or member of the Convention may interfere in [its] affairs … ’.

Radio 786 held that high, seeing its ‘commitment to inform, educate and uplift reflected in a broad range of programming which includes local and international news and current affairs, social issues, the family unit, community development and empowerment, sports and recreation’ as its focus.

It notes that it ‘has become a vital part of the community, recognised for its quality programmes, well-polished presentation style, accommodation of diverse views and opinions, topical and often exclusive current affairs interviews and dealing with issues that affect [its] community’.

Perfect Radio would have to develop a slightly different approach in terms of its vision and strategy, for the fact that its natural audience in the rural areas would likely be older people, many of whom do not have much education, and children. The station’s aspirations still are to attract university students or younger working people – not only in Tzaneen or the greater province of Limpopo, but around the country.

Coming in ‘cold’, as it were, without a history, is risky. 786 could build upon its proud political and activist roots which drew it to ‘ground-breaking … initiatives, [especially] in its early days’.

Among those were broadcasting from ‘places like Robben Island and [building] a reputation for being an active participant in South Africa’s fledgling democracy with its coveted election broadcasts’.

It also made history, significantly, in the courts, around the issue of freedom of expression when its actions led to sections of the Broadcasting Act being overturned.

Those actions began without warning in May 1998, when Radio 786 broadcast a programme entitled 'Zionism and Israel: an in-depth analysis' in which 'an interview with one Dr Yaqub Zaki, described as an historian and author, was featured'.

'In the interview, Dr Zaki dealt with the historical, political, social and economic factors which, according to him, played a role in the establishment of the state of Israel. He expressed views which, among other things, questioned the legitimacy of the state of Israel and Zionism as a political ideology, asserted that Jewish people were not gassed in concentration camps [during World War 2] … and that only a million Jews had died [there].' (SAFLII, 2002)

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) complained to the IBA, claiming the material broadcast contravened the Code of Conduct for Broadcasting Services, and could prejudice relations between Jews and other communities.

Ultimately, this would lead the IUC to challenge the constitutional validity of certain sections of the IBA Act and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) Act, which would help bring the original matter to a conclusion and set a clearer understanding of the meaning of freedom of expression in South Africa.

By way of context, 'from 1995 until May 2000, broadcasting was regulated by the IBA, a body governed by a council which was required to establish two standing committees, one being the Broadcasting Monitoring and Complaints Committee (BMCC), whose responsibility it was to monitor compliance by broadcasting licensees' (ConCourt, 2008).

'The ICASA Act [of] 2000 [repealed] certain sections of the IBA Act, and provid[ed] for the establishment of ICASA.'

At the heart of the IUC (and, therefore, 786) legal battles against these two entities, as well as the SAJBD, was its radio station's view that, effectively, the guest on its programme had not discussed his content with it beforehand, and it was therefore unable to prevent him from speaking his mind, even if what he said was unpalatable.

'The right to freedom of expression is a right enshrined in Section 16 of the Constitution of South Africa and does not extend to propaganda for war, incitement of imminent violence or advocacy of hatred that is based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion and constitutes incitement to cause harm,' explained firm of attorneys Cliffe Decker Hoffman in an assessment of' Islamic Unity Convention v Independent Broadcasting Authority' (CDH, 2019).

But, 'the court held that "implicit in its provisions is an acknowledgment that certain expression does not deserve constitutional protection because among other things it has the potential to impinge adversely on the dignity of others and cause harm". Therefore, a step too far does not deserve constitutional protection.'

The case was so important in specifically setting out the bounds to which Section 16 – which also protects freedom of the press and other media – does *not* extend, that it is still quoted today. This is not only in South Africa but also other parts of the world (Columbia).

Settlement was eventually reached with the SAJBD in 2014 'in which the IUC said [Zaki's] ideas and comments were solely his own and never reflected the position of, or any endorsement by it or Radio 786' (TMO, 2014). The SAJBD withdrew its complaint, and 786 stood by its mandate – not to 'succumb to political and corporate pressures that often influence media coverage'.

It insisted it would be 'a vital platform for those seeking a voice that challenges the status quo … encouraging listeners to confront uncomfortable truths, question mainstream narratives and engage in critical thinking (radio786.co.za)', and described itself as 'alternative'.

Perfect Radio would undoubtedly describe itself in exactly the same way. Among its programmes is a show called 'Samakatleng – Matters of the Heart', during which listeners call in simply to give expression to the issues affecting them. The show proved so popular that it was able to grow an audience of up to 100 000 people tuning in online. The attraction was that its content was always fresh because it was audience-driven.

Perfect Radio is slowly diversifying its programming on the basis of audience feedback, to the extent that, by 2025, it has breakfast and drive shows, covers current affairs, sport, business and education, and has expanded into 'girls talk', which is women-specific, and relationship counselling angles.

Radio 786's 'questioning' has had to be courageous, as it has resulted in direct attacks, such as when its website was hacked while one of its journalists, Gadija Davids, was the only South African onboard a flotilla trying to deliver supplies to Gaza. The flotilla was attacked by Israeli Defence Force soldiers, and Davids was detained with hundreds of other activists before being expelled from Israel (Harbour, 2010).

More and different challenges were to come after Radio 786 marked two decades of broadcasting in 2015 ' celebrated as a milestone for community media'. It held a successful symposium for alternative media in Cape Town, emphasising the need to broadcast an authentic African voice.

'The station's resolve was to implement its vision which set in motion the establishment of [its] Broadcasting and Media Centre. The studios incorporate top-end broadcast systems, a fully digital operations centre and the design space to produce and develop fresh and dynamic approaches to broadcasting' (radio786.co.za).

By 2020, as it marked 25 years of broadcasting, it had indeed 'launched a multi-media unit capable of broadcasting high-end quality video across the world', incorporating three distinct areas of broadcasting to suit the station's programming portfolio. This allowed it to create a new brand identity, with which it can raise funds for charitable humanitarian causes through strategic campaigns.

Among its social activities is hosting the Cape Town Ramadan and Lifestyle Expo, which draws thousands every year (Allie, 2024).
None of this was immediately possible more than 30 years ago when the new democratic dispensation opened the spectrum for community radio licences.

Radio 786 was designated to share a frequency with Voice of the Cape – and not only for a while. The two stations worked back-to-back, switching between each other at midnight seven days a week for nearly 20 years until each was finally given its own frequency in 2013 after a years'-long application process. Radio 786 retained 100.4fm, while Voice of the Cape was given 91.3fm.

There were challenges in going it alone for 786. When it shared the frequency, its content output was lower, but so was revenue. Now, it had to function and operate, fully capacitated, with 24-hour content to which it had to attract its own advertising and audience, as both stations lost listenership during the transition.

Perfect Radio was on its own from the beginning, and its strategy was not to cover stories which mainstream media was covering. It insisted on its role as a community station which would hear and listen to only the people largely unheard by the commercial outlets.

To this end, it attended local primary and high school events, including cultural stagings and sports tournaments, and any gatherings which attracted specific sections of rural communities from which it could broadcast live. There was a clear reason for this: free promotion for the station. And indeed, it was at those events that the station signed up listeners, as its staff would also take photographs of attendees to put on its social media platforms, gaining followers.

Hence, Radio Perfect's slogan is 'socialising with the people/always with the people'.

While the Limpopo station was always digital, that wasn't the case for 786 until 2017, when a technical glitch after an issue with the signal distributor led to the station going off air. This compelled it to develop a digital strategy on which it has built ever since.

'When we embarked on this, we [hadn't budgeted for it], didn't plan for this … The computer broke, and everyone was upset with each other. And then that little crisis suddenly became an upward moment of opportunity,' said station manager Tashreeq Truebody. 'At that juncture, we decided that, hey, this is a wake-up call, and we need to invest in our physical resources'.

That meant convincing 'an older generation' as to the necessity of new equipment – not just fixing one computer, but overhauling the entire studio to meet the needs of a multimedia strategy.

'It took a lot of meetings and workshopping to work out exactly what this strategy ought to look like. Our orientation was to understand that using other platforms, is complementary to the primary publication of our content, which is on the radio.

'We literally broke down walls, stripped down old wiring, until it was an empty shell, and [while that was going on, we] had a satellite broadcast from a smaller studio where we crammed in for a couple of weeks.'

Perfect Radio's reliance on social media platforms and, especially, its website as a means of live streaming its content, doesn't require the amount of investment as does 786. But websites need regular upgrading to add additional features, however nuanced those may be.

Perfect Radio had to ensure that on scant resources, it remained available at all time on the four major platforms – Facebook, YouTube, Tik Tok and Instagram. To an extent, it's attempted to use X, but that network's ever-heightened requirements for constant engagement to keep attracting new followers, are onerous. Thus, X is not a priority for Selowa and his team.

They have found a loyal listenership on Facebook with up to 87 000 people tuning in, and they have substantial support on Tik Tok at around 28 000 followers and nearly 100 000 likes. Moving onto their own radio app, Perfect Radio Digital on Google Play has been a critical development. But revenue is light. Even with their sizeable audience on Facebook, they only make a few thousand Rands a month – and this money only started coming in from the beginning of 2025.

Perfect Radio has to keep its operations lean. It can't yet dream of a high-end podcast studio, and remains hopeful that the statutory body, the MDDA, will award it a grant.

Radio 786's Truebody explained a particular dilemma 786 faced when it had no choice but to go digital, in that its 'little bit of money to be able to sustain itself', meant it didn't qualify for an MDDA grant. But that didn't signify the amounts of money needed to properly invest in resources.

'Not all community stations have the ability to do what we've done,' he said, 'but government or [institutions] like the MDDA and others do need to be a little bit more agile with how they support stations.'

Radio 786 had to find sponsors, 'go to market, raise the money to strip down everything and essentially rebuild a studio that was going to be fit for purpose for this strategy, including cameras that would be set and ready to go at any particular time … [anything required to] complement this particular goal'.

Another key element was 'requisite skills', training and developing the staff, in 'how to frame up a camera, how social media works, how to understand analytics', these being parts of what Truebody said is 'the bigger' challenge – to change staff attitudes and modes of operation.

Where Radio 786 has at least 25 staff members, Perfect Radio has a management team of four – the station manager, programming manager, a news editor and a sales assistant – and nobody is older than 30. Otherwise, it relies on volunteers and students, who have to be continuously trained and supervised not only on the technicalities, including graphic design, but on the basics: news gathering; scriptwriting; compiling reports and issuing media statements.

This means its content must run 'as is', explained Selowa, without the sophistication of professional editors. Individuals out in the field gather audio and visuals for Facebook and YouTube, cut the material themselves and upload it. They also write content for posts on Facebook.

Central to both Perfect Radio and Radio 786 is having everybody understand that they need to 'study the audience, study the listenership, look at what works, what [the audience] responds to, what the things are that they like'. In Perfect Radio's case, Selowa has a Rule 101: trends are not worth entertaining unless they come from the community and will build the community.

Truebody explained that, '[In the beginning], we identified two to three programmes that we knew did well with our existing audience but also with newer audiences that we wanted, and we only focused on those – recording them, pulling the clips, doing the graphics and then uploading onto platforms'.

'Today, as it stands, we [have] something like 38 to 40 000 more … followers on … our TikTok page compared to [a rival] station that started ahead of us.

'The point is not to have multimedia or social media for the sake of it, and then to publish anything and everything. It's to understand your audience; to look at what will work well with them. In summary: invest in your physical resources; upskill staff, and develop your content plan.'

Truebody noted there were certain aspects of the old studio that had to be minimised, cut out completely or rethought to save costs and space for elements more crucial to a new strategy. Among these was creating an area with downlighters and neons around it for hosting interviews.

'Once we do an interview for radio, we also then capture that for video, and instead of sitting around a traditional desk, we can have them sit there, and it looks like a TV set. So you get a different audience. If you look at the way podcasting is done today, they try and mimic a TV set, and that is also what we incorporated into our studio.'

The station tried to minimise spending through doing trade exchanges, but its needs expanded to include, for example, remote-controlled cameras and hand-held cameras which could be used in the field to capture material for its YouTube and Facebook pages.

Truebody said there is 'a certain amount of free-to-use software' which may be worthwhile for a community radio station whose needs are not the same as a live commercial TV news station. In that way, Radio 786 has learned to play to its natural limitations and not be unrealistic with what it wants to do.

'Again, it's about understanding your content plan. There are certain bits that you can have in a longer format [on your multimedia], but nobody's going to sit and watch a 20-minute package when you can [attract them with short, clever posts].

Selowa said Perfect Radio's belief in online platforms has given it freedom from the strict bounds of a studio as content can be populated from wherever its staff may be. That said, power cuts and a slow Internet have seriously negative impacts for them as they are wireless, if sponsored by local Internet company to an uncapped 50 Mbps.

They also have to fix equipment themselves, such as when lightning struck and damaged a computer, leaving them with only one.

Radio 786 faces a different challenge to Perfect Radio when it comes to community engagement, because it is metro-based amid a large number of competing forces, including strong commercial radio. In addition, there is another community station whose audience is similar to its own.

In terms of that, Truebody said Radio 786's view is that Muslims are 'more than just prayers'. 'How do you hold on to your job? What are your rights? Our content is a lot broader. Also, the matrices that we use are our higher LSMs which give us access to the market that we need to have, the purchasing power and buying power that we have. It is not purely religious, and we're not a conservative group of people in the station itself.'

Social media compels community radio to make choices. In the case of 786, 'We don't do X at all, because we don't have the [capability] within our newsroom to be able to upload to X and engage with it'.

'X only works if you have somebody [who] responds and is engaging, because that's how you build your audiences there.

'We have a presence on Instagram where some new stories go there, but it is more public relations as we know the [kind of] audience [we would find] there. But our primary focus in terms of platforms outside of radio, is Facebook and TikTok.

'Facebook is an older audience, and it's about community, so we use it predominantly for news and current affairs stories, plus little bits of community stuff. Stories that are largely local and national will make it our Facebook page and there the audiences interact very well with it.

'TikTok isn't just about young girls and boys dancing and doing challenges. It's become such a broad universal community, where, if you're interested in books, it will give you things about books, if you're interested in hiking, it will give you hiking. So it is important to understand the algorithms and the content that you publish on there.

'For us, TikTok [is also a place to talk to] our primary audience, especially during, say, Ramadan, the holy month, when we'll get our multimedia producer out to mosques at night to find content. Some videos will get 60 000 plays, others, 80 000, even 100 000, and we will find new audiences [that way].

‘YouTube [allows us to add] longer-format interviews – 10 to 15-minute interviews – because of community interest. Just begin to build your community in the digital space, and then later use analytics to become better at it.’

Truebody pointed to a ‘hurdle to overcome’ concerning payment from YouTube, as there is ‘compliance paperwork that is required by the United States Treasury, and I needed to take advice on exactly how to do that, because we'd not done that before and it's a different compliance level issue that we need to resolve or we're not going to be able to get the money’.

‘They can't take the money, and the money won’t fall away or anything like that as it’s owed to us. The point is how to gain access to that money.’

Perfect Radio’s advertising comes from local businesses, a certain amount of online subscriptions and campaigns instigated by various institutions, but Selowa is still using his own money to run the project, meaning he has to stay personally committed to his goal – to make information known to the community – to maintain its purpose.

A highly relevant topic for community radio stations is establishing a digital platforms rate card for advertising, and Truebody said this, too, is challenging for 786.

‘[Do] you charge for airtime for five minutes, or for an hour’s Outside Broadcast? That’s the [kind of thing that] would determine those sorts of [rates], but it's difficult to monetise it. Where you know you're endorsing a product, that's simpler to determine, but here, we are selling an audience.

‘We did look at what other stations are doing and how they've determined their rate cards and so we do now have a rate card and [we’re trying to generate money through] a symbiotic relationship between traditional radio advertising and advertising in the digital space. We obviously charge a little bit more if it involves the digital media, but there are “combo deals” that can be struck

Truebody is very clear about paywalls: ‘We live in an age where you need to be available, accessible and free, and fundamentally, we are community broadcasters, we believe in access to information. So, the test to us is, how do we fund it?’

‘We are not interested at this time to have a paid subscription upon which, if you've subscribed, you get access to certain bits of information. We believe that information is a public commodity and must be consumed by the public without expecting them [to secure] exclusive access to this, that or the other.

‘The life of your brand is [built on] trust. Your brand [must be] ethical, and then, naturally, you'll attract advertisers. That [embeds] resilience in your income strategy. And digital media is a tool that gets us closer to be able to build sustainability.

Truebody said he does not know the answer to the question: is digital transformation shaping the future of community radio?

‘I think [community radio] will continue to survive in its own right. But I think that digital transformation and access to it will be key to sustain your existing audience and to gain new audiences – they are mutually beneficial because radio has a trust factor that digital media doesn't [yet] have.

‘Radio has a reputation which digital media is yet to attain, so I don’t want to say radio will go out of business in future because of digital media. I'm not convinced of that yet. Also, there is the example in South Africa of how the country's digital migration with television is still in the courts as government has continuously failed to meet the deadline to fully roll out set-top boxes.

‘They've not done that, so if you don't have a digital TV and you don't have a set-top box, you might, at the end of the day, decide you will get whatever you want on your phone. And, of course, the primary intention of opening up the spectrum is for cellphone networks to use it, and hopefully, data [then] becomes cheaper.

‘But [while all of that is going on], the radio audiences are still holding steady, because radio is about a personal relationship: the content that you're listening to, the presenters that you're following, and that sort of thing. So, it's not a simple answer … but radio has survived so far on its own.

‘I think there's still a little bit of time left in which it will continue to survive on its own, but the test, of course, is for radio to use the opportunities that come with digital media [because] they have greater reach, and with that, you can potentially make more money and build.’

The digital tide must lift all: bridging the divide in community media in South Africa

Case study: SANEF community media digitisation drive, 2023–2024

Chris Mcinga
MeD8 Media, Implementation Partner

A sector in crisis

As digital transformation sweeps through global media, South Africa's community publications face existential challenges. Local newsrooms serving rural and township communities struggle with outdated systems, minimal digital skills and dwindling revenue streams.

SANEF recognised this critical gap and appointed MeD8 Media to implement an ambitious solution: transitioning 15 carefully selected community media outlets from traditional-only platforms to digital-included operations.

Our team's proven expertise in media transformation positioned us perfectly to lead this vital work – not just building websites but creating lasting digital platforms for community media outlets carrying voices that deserve to be heard.

Why this matters: the purpose of the project

For 12 months, MeD8 Media has executed a targeted intervention in South Africa's community media landscape. This marked the first time SANEF had undertaken such a comprehensive digital transformation initiative specifically designed for hyperlocal publishers operating in underserved communities, many publishing in indigenous languages.

Unlike mainstream media outlets with established digital infrastructure, these community publications – often the only source of local news in their regions – were being left behind in the digital revolution. Many operated solely in print or broadcast formats with no online presence, limited revenue options and rapidly diminishing audiences as readers migrated to digital platforms.

The mission transcended mere technological upgrades: it aimed to preserve crucial information channels in communities where mainstream media rarely venture. In townships and rural areas across South Africa, these publications report on local governance issues, community development, cultural events and grassroots initiatives that would otherwise go undocumented.

They maintain indigenous language journalism when most online content remains dominated by English and Afrikaans.

Breaking digital ground: implementation

Reality quickly set in once we began working with our partners. Three of the 15 organisations faced fundamental technological barriers that we hadn't fully anticipated. Some team members struggled with basic Internet navigation, had minimal digital literacy and found content management systems like WordPress challenging.

Rather than giving up, these organisations demonstrated remarkable commitment by bringing new people onto their teams specifically to support digital operations. We trained these recruits through our programme, and today they successfully maintain and run their websites independently.

Business planning revealed another critical challenge. Years of operating under MDDA grant funding had created problematic habits. Publishers were accustomed to printing newspapers regardless of economic viability, simply because grant conditions required it. This disconnection from market realities left many with unrealistic expectations about digital transformation.

We encountered ambitious plans for podcasting studios and sophisticated multimedia operations without corresponding business models or resource commitments. Several publishers wanted to immediately launch podcasts, seeing them as an exciting new medium, but hadn't considered production requirements, audience development strategies or monetisation approaches.

When we discussed the resource commitments required – dedicated staff time, equipment costs, promotion needs and the challenge of building listener bases from scratch – many reconsidered their timelines or chose to focus first on strengthening their core digital publishing operations.

These challenges had to be managed delicately, balancing honesty about operational realities without discouraging partners who were taking their first digital steps. We focused conversations on sustainable growth paths that matched each publisher's capacity while still inspiring digital innovation appropriate to their contexts.

Building from the ground up: the approach

We structured the project in two distinct phases. We began with a careful Pilot Phase involving four publishers who had no online presence and limited digital skills. Working closely with them, we provided step-by-step guidance through website setup and management.

This test phase proved invaluable, allowing us to identify common challenges, refine our support methods and anticipate similar issues before rolling out to the remaining partners.

For each publisher, we developed a personalised onboarding process. We assessed their digital literacy levels, business model, language needs and editorial workflows before helping them set up a WordPress-powered website with a custom dashboard tailored to their specific capabilities and challenges.

Throughout the process, we emphasised ownership and identity. Each website needed to authentically represent the publisher's audience through visual identity and editorial approach. We encouraged partners to make design decisions reflecting their community's character rather than imposing standardised templates. This approach fostered pride and investment in their digital platforms.

The team had to apply change management tactics to gradually help the publishers understand the importance of publishing online and not having a print copy first approach.

Getting them in the mindset that when an article is factual and has gone through editorial processes it can be published online immediately, was crucial. We emphasised that if developments occur later, they could update the existing article, helping increase consistency and publishing frequency.

The second rollout phase incorporated lessons from our pilot experience. We created separate WhatsApp groups for each publisher, ensuring our team could provide immediate assistance whenever challenges arose. This direct communication channel proved essential for building confidence among partners taking their first digital steps.

The coalface and the reality: site visits

Our team had to do site visits after the group workshop to have hands-on training with the publications/radio stations staff to ensure that the message shared during the workshop was not diluted but emphasised, as we understood the challenges of embracing change. The site visits proved to be useful for the project as they aimed to do three things.

First was to get a better understanding of the environment in which the publishers/radio stations were operating in. This environment assessment was both from our observation of the commercial opportunities like business activity in the various towns, to testing Internet connectivity signal from the offices or home offices in which they operate and assessing the equipment the participants' staff were using.

This helped our team best match those observations with the angle to use when training the staff.

This assessment was followed by a questionnaire to the publisher or station manager. Among the items were, who is your competitor? What makes your product better? How do you recruit staff and retain them? Almost like a SWOT analysis session, we had to make it realistic and understood so that it would live longer in their minds after we left.

The second part of the site visit was to conduct change management to the owner of the media outlet. This was more in line with feeding concepts they could adopt from a business point of view and exposing them to other participants' wins and losses in order to be creatively inspired and avoid already made mistakes.

The third part, which was very important to our team, was to create a 'vibe' – positivity, energy and innovative juices. This was felt as we could see ideas flowing from junior staff members giving ideas on what they would contribute.

Notable is the team from North Coast Radio in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal. This station, established in 2003 and licensed in 2008, 2014 and 2019, is dedicated to delivering relevant, empowering, accurate and reliable information to the communities of uMhlathuze and the King Cetshwayo District.

Their commitment goes beyond just broadcasting; they aim to enhance the quality of life for their listeners while promoting traditional culture, locally and globally. As a leading community radio station in northern KwaZulu-Natal, they focus on providing a platform that encourages equal rights and opportunities for women, supports youth development and fosters cohesion between rural and urban areas.

The team we were to train comprised: founder and chair of the board, Carl Modise; head of advertising, Sithembile Zondo; the station manager; programme presenters; the receptionist and admin controller, and interns who participate in various shows on air. This was the largest team we had had to train in a group session that allowed for input, brainstorming new production processes and how to integrate TikTok into the media mix.

We observed that they were still writing news bulletins using pen and paper and reading live on air from an exam notebook with no digital backup. This posed many risks, as we highlighted during the session, as this community is prone to floods and the content could be destroyed.

Having experienced the impacts of such a weather disaster in their studio, they had seen the damage it caused to their equipment and servers, so this message of having a digital copy of all news items was critical.

Team members volunteered to be brands on TikTok and promote the station, as opposed to the station having its own TikTok account that would have to be managed and maintained. This was welcomed, as community radio stations are a springboard for new and upcoming presenters who often get recruited by bigger stations, which is a source of pride.

The founder shared his spontaneous delight at one point, saying, 'Wow! We are now competing with our local newspaper!' The penny dropped: his was now not just a radio station that focused on entertainment, information and interviews. It could compete on the journalism front as it had boots on the ground in areas that the local newspaper – which focuses primarily on suburbia, and urban and peri-urban communities – doesn't reach. Rural and township-level news were the station's domain.

Another example of a dynamic newsroom that benefited from the site visits, is a publication in Polokwane City, Limpopo.

Seipone newspaper is owned and published by Diphete Bopape through Balaodi Publishers cc, a 100% black-owned and managed business.

It launched on 13 August 2002 as a trilingual publication, publishing in Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi, Xitsonga and Tshivenda.

In 2007, the paper shifted its focus and began publishing exclusively in Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi, dropping the other two languages.

The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) provided it seed funding as part of a long-term plan to establish newspapers in African languages. In addition, PanSALB gave it support through sponsorship of its marketing efforts.

Published as a monthly in its first year, the newspaper had gone fortnightly by its first birthday in August 2003. It still aims to achieve its goal of being a weekly.

Publisher Dr Mosibudi Mangena, who is an author and a former Minister of Science and Technology, emphasised the importance of preserving indigenous languages during our digitisation drive. He wished his paper's circulation could extend further than its existing footprint so that its content could be accessed by the highest-possible number of Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi-, Xitsonga- and Tshivenda-speaking people – here and abroad.

An easily created PDF version of *Seipone*'s print edition was low-hanging fruit. Amid Mangena's excitement about doing that, we pulled down his existing website and rebuilt it to capacitate it for e-editions.

The paper's team each wear multiple hats, including writing and distributing the print edition, and sometimes selling adverts and reporting at the same time. We could see that the introduction of a new project would add work to their load. Yet, they were not intimidated; they embraced the concept, and understood that using digital tools would, in fact, help them carry the load.

The old workflow was slow and outdated — articles were subbed, proofread and printed before being sent to a web developer, who would then manually copy and paste the content onto a clunky website. We needed to change this.

The team now has two options: they can either upload content directly into the content management system (CMS) and edit it there, just like they would in Microsoft Word, or they can prepare articles in Microsoft Word and simply copy and paste them into the CMS — without having to wait for the newspaper to be printed first.

Their minds were still set on a print production cycle, and we had to share the benefits of publishing and letting stories develop, or face printing old news that was already out there on social media – as was the case already.

Another memorable site visit was that to *The Eastern Cape Women's Magazine*, a small, bilingual (Xhosa and English), commercial magazine initiated by a community journalist on a mission to create a platform for the women of her province to publicise their development initiatives.

Established in 2006, it was officially launched in 2007 by the Office of the Executive Mayor of the OR Tambo District Municipality, Zoleka Capa. At the time, this publication had two offices – the Zalu Hills Multipurpose Centre in Lusikisiki, which was donated by the Department of Public Works, and the other in Mthatha where it has premises at Walter Sisulu University (formerly Unitra).

The magazine was operating without a funder or sponsor but had produced three issues with the assistance of businesswomen keen to see it on the shelves. Its main objective was to highlight women's development in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape, and to promote a culture of reading and writing among the people of the province.

Pamela Timakwe, a strong activist for women in rural communities, is the publisher.

It was an eye-opener to discover that, due to several challenges and the real risk of the publication shutting down, they no longer operate from their previous two office sites and now run the publication entirely from the publisher's home. As a result, we had to conduct our workshop from a hotel conference room located many kilometres away from their rural community, as there were no suitable facilities available in the area to host the visit.

This was a team which needed more attention. Comprising two permanent staff and four interns, it was struggling as interns were known to abscond and leave the publisher without the human resources to function. Indeed, after the training, the magazine experienced an almost 100% walkout due to the interns feeling there was no benefit for them in helping drive it, despite being given a platform to learn more and be empowered.

This is a common occurrence as there is a sense of expectation of getting instant gratification in monetary form, as most come from seriously impoverished communities with very limited opportunities.

The newsroom uses local taxis to get around in a vast area with many hills between villages. A common trip may include walking from a taxi rank drop-off area to where a reporter needs to go. This is both time-consuming and dangerous as the area which the magazine covers – Mthatha – has the highest number of murder cases in the province. The Eastern Cape has been identified as having the highest *per capita* murder rate in the country, with 20 murders per 100 000 people between July and September 2024.

The publisher is still optimistic despite her challenges and is trying her best to keep up.

The kicker for us as project leaders of this digitisation drive is how it brings joy to our hearts to have newsrooms and radio stations welcome us to their operation, as they are not exposed to what others are doing in the sector.

Practical technology for real needs

Our selection of WordPress as the CMS was deliberate and strategic. While evaluating options like Newspack and Drupal, we identified WordPress as offering the most advantages for small, independent news organisations.

WordPress's extensive open-source community makes countless third-party modules available, allowing integration with common digital marketing platforms and flexible expansion of functionality. The abundance of free tutorials on basic site management provides publishers with continued learning resources beyond our formal training.

Crucially, we considered sustainability beyond the programme's duration. WordPress's widespread adoption in South Africa means local developers are readily available if publishers need to modify or enhance their sites in the future. The platform's intuitive interface also reduces the learning curve for new team members joining these small organisations.

We implemented a WordPress multi-site approach, enabling centralised management of key plugins, and security updates across all 15 websites. This architecture allowed our technical team to efficiently address cybersecurity concerns while giving publishers full control over their content.

The multi-site structure also simplified user management, allowing us to assist with password resets and journalist profile creation during the critical early adoption phase.

This approach significantly reduced costs by centralising certain licences while maintaining individualised websites. To date, we have encountered no significant disadvantages to this implementation model – a notable achievement considering the diverse technical environments and skill levels involved.

Tools that transform production

Understanding that community newsrooms are both understaffed and under-resourced, we introduced practical tools to reduce their dependence on outsourced services like ad design, proposal creation and newspaper layout.

The prohibitive cost of Adobe Creative Suite licenses and the high-specification computers required to run them, had previously forced many publishers to outsource their design work. We trained partners to use the free version of Canva, establishing workflows that allowed them to create and edit designs even on mobile phones. This capability was particularly valuable for publishers constantly moving between community events and their offices.

Some publishers requested access to Canva's paid features, which led to an important principle that guided our entire project: we would provide premium tools only if publishers could demonstrate how they would generate revenue to sustain these tools beyond our programme. This approach encouraged strategic thinking about adoption.

Canva is now used not just for advertisement creation but also designing professional proposals and rate cards. While this tool may seem straightforward to many users, it represented a significant learning curve for some publishers who have now mastered its basic functions.

For North Coast Radio, we implemented SoundCloud to host interviews that they wanted to embed within website articles. This integration created a more engaging user experience while extending the life of their broadcast content.

AI generative platforms like ChatGPT were introduced to assist with proofreading and creating SEO-friendly headlines. Initially, this represented a major mindset shift for publishers with no previous exposure to AI tools. Today, many regularly use these platforms for tasks ranging from email composition to sentence structure improvements, particularly valuable for English-language publications.

We also established video editing workflows and YouTube channel setups for partners interested in multimedia content. But no publisher or radio station has yet achieved significant viewership, despite these platforms showing promise – a reminder that building digital audiences requires persistent effort.

Support structures that last

To ensure sustainable impact beyond our direct involvement, we built dedicated platforms to support projects and their future growth.

The Community Media Support Services (CMSS) website (https://communitymss.co.za/) was established as an independent brand designed to outlive the SANEF project itself. This approach eliminated reliance on telephone support or printed manuals that quickly become outdated as technology evolves.

The site's 'Learn' section hosts categorised modules covering every aspect of digital publishing, from basic WordPress usage to advanced multimedia production. These guides are continuously updated as we introduce new tools and techniques. Video tutorials and step-by-step instructions support newsrooms dealing with high staff turnover – a common challenge when relying on volunteers or minimally-compensated freelancers.

We also publish sector updates to keep publishers informed about broader industry developments. The platform is accessible to anyone in South Africa interested in digital news production, extending our impact beyond direct programme participants.

Additionally, we created ePress (https://epress.co.za/), which was initially conceived as a news aggregator but evolved into a discovery platform for media buyers. This shift came after recognising that individual publishers lacked sufficient visibility to attract advertising planners.

In its early stages, ePress has already generated paid advertising opportunities for both print and online publications, demonstrating its potential to become more than a directory and rather a genuine lead generation and ad booking platform for community newsrooms.

My knowledge tells me that without a platform, you don't have a vehicle to carry content. Without support, you can't drive that platform to reach and grow your audience, and without financial backing, you can't sustain the project. These three elements form the foundation of digital media sustainability.

The impact so far

By the completion of the programme, we successfully built, upgraded or customised 15 WordPress websites, each designed for its particular environment and audience. More than 32 publishers and staff members received intensive training in digital publishing, multimedia production and workflow management.

The impact has extended beyond our original scope. Seeing the success of our original partners, seven additional publishers have independently contracted for similar services, paying for the same digital transformation experience. This organic growth demonstrates the recognised value of our approach and suggests a sustainable model for continued sector development.

Our fortnightly 'pop-in' training sessions and physical workshops saw consistent participation that exceeded expectations. These sessions have gained remarkable popularity, with 65 new subscribers opting to receive notifications about upcoming training opportunities.

The Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) has requested permission to share our training content with their broader membership, creating a multiplier effect beyond our direct partners.

Responding to this demand, we've begun developing short training videos focusing on AI applications for newsrooms. These resources are hosted on our CMSS YouTube channel, extending our reach and building capacity across the sector. This widespread industry endorsement confirms the critical need for continued digital support among community publishers.

Lessons from the field

Our journey revealed several valuable insights that will shape future initiatives. We discovered that even publishers with no digital background can become fully operational online with proper onboarding and consistent support. WhatsApp-based support proved far more effective than traditional helpdesks, offering immediate interaction when publishers encountered problems – an approach we'll maintain going forward.

We watched as peer-to-peer learning flourished among partners, creating deeper engagement and knowledge sharing than we had anticipated. The AI tools we introduced saved time and improved content quality, especially for small teams with limited editorial capacity, proving that technology, when properly adapted, can empower rather than intimidate.

Publishers particularly appreciated being treated as equals and given ownership of their platforms from day one. The emphasis on language-inclusive publishing – with content in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Sepedi and more – helped build loyal, hyperlocal digital audiences that might otherwise remain underserved online.

We also discovered that publishers struggled significantly with promotion and advertising sales – a crucial aspect of sustainability. In response, we developed professional profiles for each publication along with digital rate cards and proposals they could use when approaching potential advertisers.

These materials have empowered publishers to better position themselves in a competitive market and create new revenue streams.

'Sustain-the-ability' to endure

We had to define sustainability from the onset and crystallise it to embed it in the publishers' business. Our broad definition was that, when you are out of the programme, you would have the ability to run the digital asset by yourself. This concept, while simple, focuses on the essence of sustainability.

From our internal perspective, we understood that publishers already faced the global challenge of finding alternative revenue models. Many had expectations of generating substantial online advertising revenue, but reality often proved different.

During our early onboarding workshops, we introduced sections dedicated to business models which were designed by Steve Kromberg from Social Weaver, a company that delivers training and consulting in content creation, strategic communication and management.

Social Weaver played a significant role in the early stages of the digitisation drive, helping establish the project framework.

The Business Development and Alternative Revenue Streams section drew from cases studied during an AIP-United States Embassy trip that Kromberg and I attended at Ohio University during the project. These models included subscription-based revenues, newsletter advertising, donation models (encouraging readers to support journalism as a public good) and newsrooms partnering with community events as media partners.

Other models included merchandise sales and service offerings like PR writing for companies.

While these models show promise, implementing them requires capacity that many newsrooms struggle to find amid daily operations.

Publisher Oratile Setae's *North West Times* has, for instance, successfully implemented merchandising and events models, selling branded apparel and participating in community seminars as media partners. As a small team based in that province, the publication takes pride in its brand, viewing community support through merchandise purchases as evidence of trust and recognition.

Sustainability also requires newsrooms to reconsider their identity and embrace new opportunities.

Jerry Sokuphe, publisher of the *Soweto Sunrise News*, such a case in point. He participated in a paid climate change reporting initiative that provided data for environmental stories. Such opportunities were previously difficult to pursue due to the unpredictable nature of print publishing.

With reliable online platforms, publishers can now engage in such initiatives and receive compensation for their expertise.

Digital presence has addressed the 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' problem. Publishers are now discoverable online, enhancing their credibility when applying for grants, approaching funders and engaging with advertisers.

Having worked at one of South Africa's largest community media owners with over 140 newspaper titles and participating in their digital transformation efforts, I've seen first-hand how challenging it remains to balance online growth without cannibalising print revenue.

Online advertising revenue is still a fraction of print revenue, even for major publishers who've been working on this challenge for two decades. But I've had to set aside that reality and focus on the potential for South Africa's independent community media sector to develop innovative solutions that might eventually solve problems that even the largest publishers continue to face.

The concept of sustainability, for us, is about 'sustaining the ability' – simply enduring over time. The fact that publishers are paying out of their pockets to maintain their digital platforms, demonstrates they recognise the value, even when immediate financial returns aren't yet evident.

Where to from here?: looking forward

The SANEF community media digitisation drive has laid a foundation that extends beyond South Africa. Our structure, onboarding process, training model and support systems provide a blueprint that could be replicated across Africa where similar challenges exist.

In South Africa, our next phase includes expanding the CMSS platform with more resources and support features. We're particularly excited about our ePress platform's potential to make publishers discoverable by media buyers, which has already expanded beyond our original programme participants to benefit the wider community media sector.

To ensure long-term success, we've introduced a subscription-based support model. This gives publishers the choice to continue receiving assistance if they're not yet ready to operate fully independently, ensuring no one gets left behind as South Africa's media landscape evolves.

As we continually keep pace with emerging technologies, particularly AI applications for news production, we immediately integrate these innovations into our training programmes. This approach allows our partners to focus on producing quality, credible journalism for their communities while staying technologically current – a balance many would struggle to achieve independently.

As we reflect on this journey, we're reminded that digital transformation in community media isn't just about websites and tools – it's about preserving voices, strengthening communities and ensuring diverse perspectives remain vital in our national conversation.

Spotlight on *Izwi Lomphakathi*

One of our inspiring partnerships has been with *Izwi Lomphakathi* ('the voice of the community'), an isiZulu community newspaper based in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal. Founded by veteran journalist Langelihle Chagwe during the pandemic, this publication, which serves rural and previously marginalised communities, had no digital presence before joining our programme.

A year into its digital journey, the transformation has been remarkable. From zero online presence, *Izwi Lomphakathi* (https://izwinews.co.za/) now attracts between 3 000 and 7 000 page views monthly – sometimes outperforming publications that had established websites before our programme began.

They've developed an effective cross-platform strategy, using Facebook to market stories and WhatsApp to connect directly with readers.

This digital transition has opened doors to new revenue opportunities. For the first time, the newspaper is working with a media agency that serves isiZulu-translated banner ads from national brands, with companies that had never advertised in their print edition.

'Seeing national brands on our website was a breakthrough moment for us,' Chagwe told us during a recent check-in. 'It showed us that going digital wasn't just about surviva – it was about reaching new heights we couldn't have imagined before.'

Spotlight on *Phethoho News*

Phethoho News serves communities across Mangaung Municipality and Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality in the Free State with accurate local reporting focused on strengthening social cohesion, promoting economic growth and encouraging good governance.

Before joining the SANEF digitisation drive, it operated primarily as a print publication with 10 000 fortnightly copies, maintaining a basic Facebook page and website without strategic digital workflow. Its small four-person team was led by publisher David Mokotjo, who managed multiple roles and struggled to maintain consistent digital operations while producing its print edition.

After a year in the programme, *Phethoho News* has made modest but meaningful progress toward digital transformation. Its web traffic remains relatively low compared to other partners, partly reflecting the smaller population and limited Internet access in their service area. This highlights an important reality: digital transformation in deeply rural communities requires longer timeframes and different success metrics.

Despite these challenges, the team has established structured digital publishing processes and now strategically uses their print newspaper to drive audience awareness of their online platforms with every edition.

'Having worked with the team leading this digitisation project, we have been inspired by the transparency and willingness to assist us as we navigate this space,' said Mokotjo. 'We continue working with them, especially in improving our print product to be a touch point for our online platform as we promote our news offer online. Thank you SANEF for this opportunity. We will continue with the services of CMSS to help us in year two.'

Their story reminds us that meaningful digital transformation in community media isn't measured solely by traffic numbers, but by organisational capacity building, strategic integration of print and digital assets and sustainable progression toward digital fluency.

Spotlight on *Inkundla Yezindaba*

Inkundla Yezindaba is a vibrant community newspaper based in the INK region – Inanda, Ntuzuma and KwaMashu – situated about 20km north-west of Durban within the eThekwini Municipality. Recognised as part of South Africa's Urban Renewal Programme due to high poverty levels, this area is rich in culture and community spirit.

Inkundla Yezindaba publishes content in isiZulu (60%) and English (40%), with a strong focus on social, cultural and economic issues that shape the daily lives of their readers. The publication's mission is to inform, educate and inspire, with the goal of building unity and pride within the community while using journalism as a tool for positive change.

Founded and published by Zinhle Cebekhulu – a former community college lecturer-turned-successful media entrepreneur – the newspaper already had a website (https://inkundlayezindaba.co.za/) before joining the SANEF digitisation drive. But while the website existed, it had been developed by an intern, and the team lacked a structured digital workflow and strategy to maintain or grow the platform.

Motivation and proper training were needed to show that managing both print and online publishing was possible and achievable, even with a small team.

Before the digitisation support, *Inkundla Yezindaba* stayed relevant mainly through creative community engagement like hosting awards events, which built strong trust with their readership and strengthened relationships with the municipality. Adding a more active digital presence was a natural next step to align with their innovative spirit under Cebekhulu’s leadership.

The team of five operates from an entrepreneurial innovation hub, surrounded by other small businesses and start-ups into which they have smartly tapped for shared services when needed.

Since participating in the digitisation drive, *Inkundla Yezindaba*'s traffic has been slowly growing. While there's still a long road ahead to fully commercialise its digital platform, its groundwork is in place. Its pride in the isiZulu language and culture puts it in a unique position to tap into an audience that wants news that speaks to its identity.

The combination of print strength and a nurturing approach to digital will serve the paper well over time, especially as more people in its community shift to consuming news online. Reflecting on the journey, Cebekhulu said ‘the digitisation drive excited us as it gave us another bite at the apple’.

‘Despite us having operational challenges, we are happy that we have a digital asset … that we can nurture, as we can see people are migrating online. Our print is still strong, but we think that in time our readers will want us to do more online.

‘The workshop we attended for this programme also helped us broaden our minds to possibilities. We appreciated the exposure to other publishers who are in the same boat as us."

The story of *Inkundla Yezindaba* shows that for community media based in culturally-proud regions like INK, digitisation is not just about being online – it’s about futureproofing trusted local voices and making sure they remain part of the next chapter of South African media.

Publisher success story: Icamagu Media

Icamagu Media represents the innovative fusion of traditional and digital platforms operating in some of South Africa's most underserved rural communities. Based outside East London in the Eastern Cape, publisher Lulama Mpahla leads this indigenous community news project that combines print with a digital radio station broadcasting primarily in isiXhosa, the province's most widely spoken language.

The project began with Icamagu Online Radio, broadcasting from a modest studio built behind Mpahla's home. Operating via satellite Internet due to limited infrastructure, the station exemplifies the determination required to deliver media services in rural South Africa.

When Icamagu Media joined the SANEF digitisation drive, it expanded its operation by launching an online news platform (https://icamaguonline.co.za/), quickly realising digital's potential when its coverage of a major taxi violence incident generated more than 10 000 impressions in a month.

While this traffic surge resulted from an isolated event, it provided crucial motivation for the team to recognise the genuine opportunities in digital publishing.

Today, Icamagu Media maintains a flexible approach – producing print editions on demand while focusing resources on growing an online audience. Its radio platform (https://icamagulive.co.za/) and news portal continue developing as essential voices for indigenous-language media in the Eastern Cape.

Their journey demonstrates how digital transformation can extend the reach of community media while preserving linguistic and cultural identity. By embracing both traditional and digital channels, Icamagu Media ensures vital community information reaches audiences, regardless of connectivity challenges. It's a model of adaptation that strengthens South Africa's diverse media landscape.

Spotlight on additional digital transformation journeys

Highveld Chronicle

Highveld Chronicle (https://hconline.co.za/), published by Mfanzile Dlakunde, joined our programme as part of the 'haves' category – publications with existing online platforms facing significant challenges. Its website had been compromised through Facebook-hacking incidents and its digital presence required a complete rebuild.

We established its website within our secure WordPress environment, providing comprehensive training through the CMSS platform, virtual pop-in sessions and dedicated support via its publication's WhatsApp group. Today, *Highveld Chronicle* consistently ranks in the top five publications for traffic performance among our programme participants.

Its print edition maintains impressive strength with a regular printing cycle, verified by a Grassroots Certificate from the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) – South Africa's recognised print circulation auditing firm that verifies distribution figures and ensures newspapers reach intended audiences.

Soweto Sunrise News

Publisher Sokuphe exemplifies entrepreneurial spirit in one of South Africa's most iconic communities. Operating primarily as a one-person operation supported by volunteers, he has embraced digital tools with remarkable enthusiasm.

Sokuphe has deeply integrated Canva into his production process, significantly enhancing both his website and newspaper's visual appeal. Taking innovation further, he leads in utilising AI tools like Meta AI to generate images that enhance his content – this being particularly valuable in an environment where stock photography access is limited, and purchasing rights remains prohibitively expensive.

This creative problem-solving has helped *Soweto Sunrise News* (https://sowetosunrise.co.za/) maintain its position among the top five best-performing websites in monthly traffic metrics, demonstrating how resourcefulness can overcome resource limitations.

Tshwane Bulletin

Covering news throughout South Africa's capital city, *Tshwane Bulletin* (https://www.tshwanebulletin.co.za/) represents a success story in balancing print sustainability with digital growth. Publisher Tebogo Modiba has maintained a strong print edition through consistent publication supported by a reliable advertiser base.

His eagerness to evolve by developing a digital platform that complements his print publication, reflects forward-thinking leadership. This approach aims not just to increase revenue streams but also to introduce existing clients to new online audiences, creating a sustainable bridge between traditional and digital media models.

The Eye News

Mashile Phalane from *The Eye News* in Limpopo province faces significant challenges due to limited skilled personnel in his rural community. Recognising these unique circumstances, our team has committed to providing additional support, essentially functioning as an extension of his newsroom until local capacity can be developed.

This tailored approach demonstrates our commitment to meeting publishers where they are and providing solutions that address their specific contexts – a principle that has guided our entire programme. We remain confident that, with continued support, *The Eye News* will gain digital momentum over time.

RFM radio station

Led by Johnathan Mathebula, the team at RFM deserve special recognition for strategically focusing their digital efforts on social media platforms that directly support their core radio broadcasting operations. Their passion for community broadcasting has guided their digital strategy, prioritising platforms that enhance their primary mission, rather than diluting their focus. This approach exemplifies how media outlets can make strategic decisions about digital transformation that align with their organisational strengths and community priorities – sometimes meaning a narrower digital focus, rather than attempting to excel across all possible platforms.

Our thoughts

Through this case study, we acknowledge all participants for their dedication and understanding that developing a digital strategy resembles starting a new business – profits and high traffic rarely materialise in the first year. Success comes through applying strategies, learning from setbacks and maintaining resilience.

With the overwhelming response we received from publications across South Africa applying for this project, we remain confident that the digital tide will indeed lift all one day.

As we've emphasised throughout this programme: sustainability is 'sustain-the-ability' to continue being resilient.

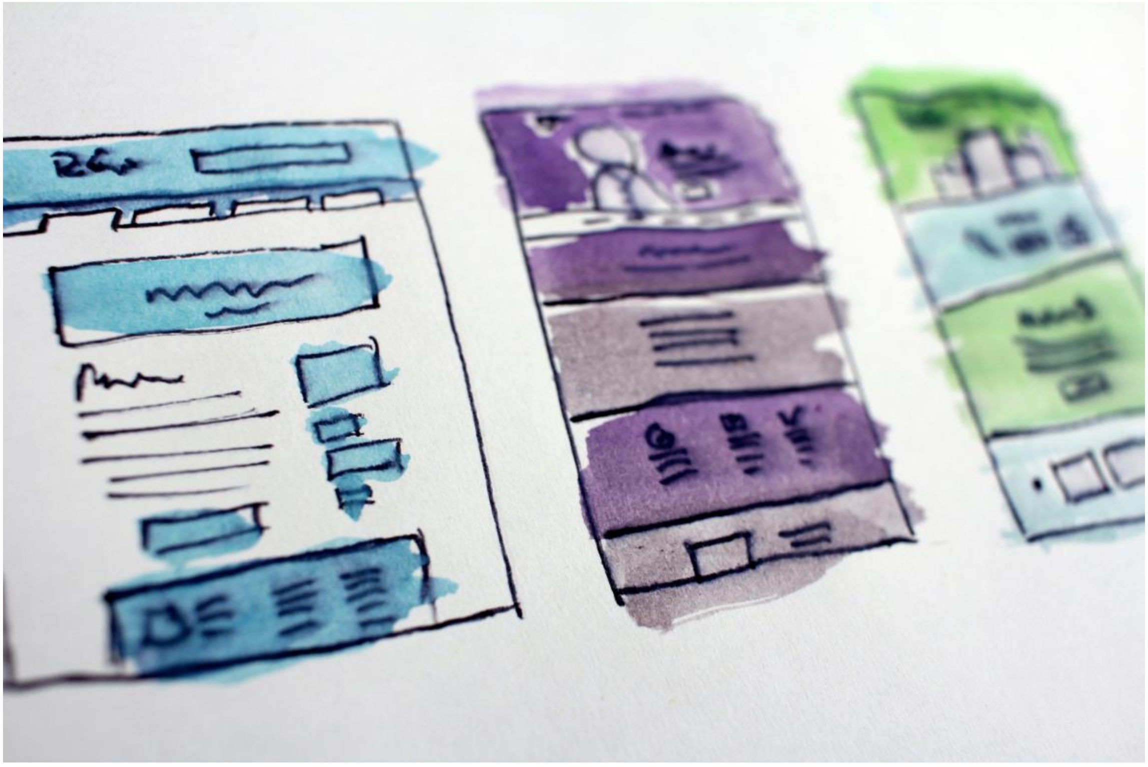

Photo by Hal Getewood, Unsplash

Appendix: Global guidelines on AI, Digital Economy and the Fourth Estate

Unesco Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms

UNESCO aims to ensure that everyone's freedom of expression, access to information and diverse cultural content are fully guaranteed, while various stakeholders, including Member States, deal with the problems of dis- and misinformation and hate speech online.

These problems will be better addressed, in a way that aligns with international human rights law, through implementing the UNESCO Guidelines in a comprehensive and coherent manner. These are guidelines for safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information on digital platforms through a multistakeholder approach.

Digital platforms have become a new front in the pursuit of peace. The transformative role that digital platforms have played in advancing human rights is undeniable. Yet the same digital platforms that have democratised access to knowledge and culture, and fostered global connection, have also become ecosystems of misinformation, disinformation, ideological polarisation and incitement to violence, discrimination and hate.

Such features have undermined democracies and threatened human rights across the world.

Thus, while companies lack transparency, accountability and due diligence, many countries have embarked on regulatory processes but without a human rights-respecting approach, which deeply weakens the civic space and leads to different kinds of censorship.

Enabling environment: how we are going to achieve this goal?

All stakeholders share responsibility for sustaining an enabling environment for freedom of expression and the right to information while ensuring there is an open, safe and secure environment for users and non-users.

The Guidelines outline a set of duties, responsibilities and roles for states, digital platforms, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, media, academia, the technical community and other stakeholders to enable an environment where freedom of expression and information are at the core of digital platforms governance processes.

Member States:

1. Must respect, protect and fulfil human rights in accordance with international human rights standards
2. Should avoid using arbitrary or disproportionate measures to deal with these harms
3. Should put in place policies aligned with international human rights law
4. Should promote free, independent and plural media and guarantee strong protections for journalists
5. Should refrain from imposing measures such as Internet shutdowns

Independent regulators:

- Should be equipped with the means to enforce international human rights standards in the digital ecosystem

International organisations:

- Should support stakeholders in providing technical assistance, monitoring and reporting human rights violations

Civil society, academia and media:

- Are important watchdogs: they monitor, evaluate and report on laws, policies and regulatory actions, among others, that impact human rights, as well as the behaviour of the digital platforms

Digital platform companies:

1. Should be requested to and be able to manage and mitigate human rights risks related to potential harmful content
2. Should commit to align their design processes, as well as their content moderation and curation policies and practices, to international human rights standards
3. Should be transparent and accountable
4. Should be able to give their users the tools to engage critically with their products

Digital platforms should comply with five key principles:

1. Conducting human rights due diligence
2. Adhering to international human rights standards including in platform design, content moderation and content curation
3. Transparency
4. Making available information accessible, and
5. Being accountable to relevant stakeholders

The Guidelines outline the importance for companies to evaluate risk:

- prior to any significant design changes, major policy decisions (including those related to the advertising system, if applicable), changes in operations or new activity or relation/partnerships
- regularly, to protect the rights of all groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalisation, including women and girls, journalists, artists, human rights defenders and environmental defenders
- ahead of electoral processes to protect their integrity

- in response to emergencies, crises or conflict, or significant changes in the operating environment

The Guidelines call for a multistakeholder approach to the governance of digital platforms and are designed to apply to a wide range of forms of governance.

Five overarching principles apply:

- Platforms' content curation and moderation policies and processes should be transparent
- Checks and balances should be formally institutionalised
- Governance processes should be open and accessible to all stakeholders including the most vulnerable and marginalised groups
- Diverse expertise should be a common feature of all regulatory arrangements
- Governance should protect and promote cultural diversity and the diversity of cultural expression

Regulatory arrangements should:

- Be effective and sustainable
- Ensure independent oversight
- Develop through open, transparent and evidence-based processes

The Guidelines highlight the importance of media and information literacy programmes by recognising that they should:

- put emphasis on the empowerment of users
- promote cultural diversity, social inclusion and global citizenship
- aim to reduce the 'participation gap' between citizens who engage in the creation and critical use of media and information content and those who do not
- promote gender equality and women's empowerment and provide opportunities for participation by groups in situations of vulnerability and marginalisation

These Guidelines will:

- encourage and contribute to the development of global multistakeholder networks and common spaces to debate and share good practices about digital platform governance, gathering different visions and a broad spectrum of perspectives
- serve as a tool for all relevant stakeholders to advocate for human rights-respecting regulation and to hold governments and digital platforms accountable
- advance evidence-based and human rights-based policy approaches

- encourage as much worldwide convergence as possible in platform governance policies to avoid internet fragmentation

Content Moderators' Manifesto

This Manifesto was produced in consultation with content moderators at the Content Moderators Summit in Berlin on 9 and 10 March 2023. The Manifesto calls for an end to exploitation in content moderation.

The Summit was organised by the nonprofit organisations Foxglove, SUPERRR Lab and Aspiration and the German labour union, ver.di. The Manifesto was published as part of a public hearing of the Bundestag about the working conditions of content moderators.

Manifesto:

We, content moderators of Facebook, TikTok, Majorel and Telus, work to keep communities safe. Without us, social media companies would collapse overnight. Despite this, these companies exploit, bully and abuse us. We will remain silent no longer. Today we demand immediate, industry-wide change. Social media can never be safe until our own workplaces are safe and fair.

Content moderation work is highly skilled. Our work requires cultural and language expertise, and social media could not exist without us. Our pay and benefit packages must reflect this.

Despite day-to-day exposure to toxic content, we earn no hazard pay. Companies must also provide a hazard bonus of at least 35% of moderators' annual salary. Clear policies must be consistently implemented, providing us with meaningful leave, holiday, breaks, overtime and opportunities for promotion.

Proper mental health care must be provided to all content moderators. Content moderation poses serious risks to our mental health including depression, anxiety, insomnia and PSTD.

Each company must obtain independent, expert advice on effective safeguards and implement recommendations without delay. In the meantime, access to an independent, mental health clinician must be provided to each of us, on a 24-hour basis.

The culture of secrecy and bullying must end. We are made to sign non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) designed to scare us into silence. No NDA can legitimately stop us raising concerns about the conditions of our work. We must be allowed to speak about the conditions of their work, to ease the pressure we face, and to allow for organising. These NDAs must be dissolved with immediate effect.

Social media companies must encourage content moderators to collectively organise, bargain and join a union of their choice, as well as form work councils across the industry.

All outsourcing of content moderation must stop. The critical safety work of content moderation must be brought in-house by each social media company. As companies transition, there must be no differential treatment in pay or benefits between those of us who are employed directly and those working via third party companies.

All oppressive and unreasonable surveillance and algorithmic management must be scrapped, so we can moderate content effectively.

Social media companies must ensure equal work is equally compensated. Social media companies must guarantee workers are treated the same irrespective of background or country of residence. We are content moderators in Germany, but we stand with our colleagues around the world who do the same work for a fraction of the American or European wage and under far harsher conditions.

This digital colonialism must end, with all disparity in pay, benefits and conditions removed, and our standards made uniform across the world.

African instruments and digital policy and freedom of expression

Press Council of South Africa

The work done by African journalists and their rights to do it in the digital age are protected by the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa.

This is the dominant online rights instrument for the continent, the guiding light, although there are other African instruments which equally guarantee individuals the right to receive information as well as to express and disseminate it.

Adopted by the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) in The Gambia in 2019, the Declaration establishes and affirms principles which anchor those rights in conformance with Article 9 of the African Charter, adopted by the Organisation of African Unity in 1981 before it became the African Union (AU) in 1987.

Article 9 states: 'Every individual shall have the right to receive information', and 'Every individual shall have the right to express and disseminate [their] opinions.'

The 2019 Declaration replaced the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, which the AU adopted in 2002. The earlier document preceded the examination of Article 9 rights against the codification of access to information rights and the accelerating impacts of the internet. This is now more pertinent than ever, considering the prevalence of Big Tech.

The latest iteration – which is guided by African and international human rights instruments and standards, including the jurisprudence of African judicial bodies – includes access to online information and takes note of developments in some technologies.

It takes into account norms developed by the ACHPR such as 2013's Model Law on Access to Information for Africa, and 2017's Guidelines on Access to Information and Elections in Africa.

The Declaration, and new Resolutions on information integrity, access to data and public service content adopted in 2024 and 2025 by the ACHPR, have effectively given the African Commission's Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa a mandate to extend her work into the digital sphere.

The Special Rapporteur, established by ACHPR in 2004, is tasked with promoting and safeguarding the rights to freedom of expression and access to information across the continent. The mandate involves analysing national media laws and policies, monitoring state compliance with Article 9 of the African Charter, conducting fact-finding missions, and issuing public interventions in response to violations.

The Resolutions adopted in 2025 are:

- The Resolution on Developing Guidelines to Assist States Monitor Technology Companies in Respect of Their Duty to Maintain Information Integrity Through Independent Fact-Checking 2025 (Res. 630), which recognises the responsibility of technology companies to maintain information integrity and prevent the unchecked spread of false or misleading information

It commits to assessing public interest content and developing guidelines to ensure platforms operating in Africa serve the needs of the people.

This Resolution is a call to reimagine digital spaces as places that empower communities rather than exploit them.

- The Resolution on Working Towards the Assessment of Public Interest Content in this Digital Era and Developing Guidelines to Ensure a Public Interest Element for All Platforms Operating in Africa 2025 (Res. 631), which takes a much-needed step toward ensuring that digital spaces remain spaces for truth, democracy, and shared knowledge

Strengthening independent fact-checking mechanisms and ensuring that African Commission Member States hold digital platforms accountable, while respecting freedom of expression, are acts intended to ensure a more informed and accountable digital environment and safeguard the integrity of information.

A key aspect of the 2025 Resolutions is the call for digital companies operating in Africa to adopt transparent human rights impact assessments as part of their due diligence. The Resolutions should help provide policy direction and mechanisms for this.

Through the Resolutions, the Special Rapporteur is called to consult with African role players with an interest in broadcasting, freedom of expression, media freedom, digital rights, access to information policy and lawmaking to assess their concept of public service content in current times.

Also notable is the August 2024 Ad Hoc Committee formed to Elaborate a Comprehensive International Convention on Countering the Use of Information and Communications Technologies for Criminal Purposes by the United Nations General Assembly while negotiating a new Convention on cybercrime.

This Ad Hoc Committee's purpose echoed the vision of the AU on the need to develop a legal framework on cybersecurity at a global level.

The AU adopted its own Convention on Cybersecurity and Personal Data Protection on 27 June 2014, underpinned by fundamental texts of domestic law and protected by international human rights Conventions and Treaties, particularly the African Charter.

Cybersecurity is also one of the Flagship Projects of Agenda 2063, the AU's 50-year strategic framework for transforming the continent into a global powerhouse.

Several other related instruments and frameworks have been adopted by the AU, including the

- African Common Position on the Application of International Law to the Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Cyberspace, which was adopted by the AU Peace and Security Council in January 2024 and endorsed by the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, and
- the Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy and the African Digital Compact which were endorsed in June 2024 by the AU's Specialised Technical Committee (STC) on Communication and ICT

The Strategy and the Compact constituted Africa's contribution to the Global Digital Compact and the UN Summit of the Future in September 2024.

Both are anchored in the Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa of July 2024, which prioritises digitally enabled socio-economic development to stimulate job creation, address poverty, reduce inequality and facilitate the delivery of goods and services.

The ambition is the achievement of Agenda 2063 and to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Haarlem Declaration 2024

Championing AI for advancing inclusive, safe and reliable digital media spaces!

As a global community of digital media makers – including independent media organisations, journalists, digital content creators and civil society groups using digital media for social impact – we recognise that AI technologies, and generative AI in particular, is actively and rapidly influencing, shaping and transforming the digital media ecosystem.

Its influence extends across all aspects of content creation, curation, recommendation, moderation, distribution, promotion and audience analytics.

While AI technology offers the potential to make routine and labour-intensive digital media processes and functions more efficient, streamlined and cost-effective, its deployment also introduces significant risks.

Already visible is the disruption of the digital media ecosystem through the proliferation of misinformation, an erosion of human oversight in editorial decision-making and the displacement of media workers. As a result, there is an urgent need for a value-driven, responsible and ethics-based approach to integrating AI technologies across digital media work and organisations.

The Global Digital Compact, adopted by United Nations Member States in September 2024 at the Summit of the Future, outlines as part of its broader key objectives to 'foster an inclusive, open, safe and secure digital space that respects, protects and promotes human rights, advance responsible, equitable and interoperable data governance approaches, and enhance international governance of AI for the benefit of humanity'.

It is imperative that we, as digital media practitioners, take a proactive stance.

We must commit towards using this powerful technology, in its application(s) to digital media, for advancing public good, and in service of the public interest.

We, therefore, under the ambit of Haarlem Declaration 2024, commit to deploying and utilising all forms of AI-powered tools and technologies, in relation to digital media, in accordance with the following values and principles:

1. Ensuring transparency and explainability

Human accountability: maintain transparency about how AI contributes to tasks and decision-making processes across individual, programmatic and organisational levels.

Explainable tools: prioritise the use of AI tools that provide clear, understandable explanations for their recommendations, data privacy settings and data consent management.

Continuous education: educate ourselves and relevant stakeholders about AI functionalities, potential biases and limitations to enable greater transparency and better inform our decisions.

Examples in practice:

We commit to conveying to our stakeholders and audiences how AI is utilised in content production, curation, distribution and audience analytics practices.

We commit to urge AI developers to prioritise explainability and accessibility in AI systems designs, and we, as digital media practitioners, commit to sharing this information in an engaging and understandable way to promote the public good and foster informed dialogue.

2. Promoting ethical data practices

Protect personal Information: ensure all AI applications comply with data protection laws and safeguard sensitive data.

Data minimisation: limit data collection to what is necessary for specific, clearly defined purposes.

Consent and agency: obtain informed consent for data use, providing users with transparent, accessible privacy policies that clearly outline how data is collected stored, used, shared and deleted. Enable users to exercise control and agency over their data with opt-in and opt-out options.

Examples in practice:

We commit to implementing AI tools that have clear terms and processes for data collection and use – including having opt-in and opt-out options in place.

We commit to calling on AI developers to design tools and systems that prioritise data diversity and inclusivity, guided by frameworks of informed consent and privacy protections.

We commit to openly communicating to our audiences and stakeholders what types of data we collect, the purpose behind the collection and how we use this data, whether for content curation, data analytics or other applications.

3. Safeguarding information integrity and content authenticity

Validate AI outputs: implement comprehensive fact-checking protocols for all content generated, curated or recommended by AI systems to ensure its reliability.

Avoid and minimise misinformation: establish safeguards in our processes to ensure that all AI-supported communications are factual and non-harmful …

Quality control: develop and adhere to content standards that prioritise accuracy, credibility and contextual integrity before dissemination.

Examples in practice

We commit to upholding journalistic integrity and accuracy, ensuring that AI-generated content adheres to the same standards of truth as human-produced content.

We commit to respecting the intellectual property rights of independent media and refrain from using our content to train their AI models without explicit permission or financial compensation.

We commit to full transparency when AI tools have been used to create or support digital content – be it text, audio, visual, captions – as well as for fundraising purposes, such as proposal development, positioning and visibility documents.

We commit to upholding necessary measures and knowledge sharing to uphold the content provenance and authenticity.

4. Minimising bias, harm and discrimination in the use of AI tools

Assess AI applications: regularly evaluate AI tools to identify, mitigate and address potential biases that could result in unjust or discriminatory outcomes.

Promote fairness: use diverse datasets and inclusive algorithmic designs to ensure AI systems treat users equitably, and prevent the perpetuation of harmful and discriminatory stereotypes.

Human oversight: maintain active human supervision to monitor and correct biased AI outputs ensuring alignment with human rights principles.

Examples in practice

We consciously implement AI for content moderation in ways that uphold freedom of expression while effectively countering harmful content such as hate speech and disinformation.

We commit to ensuring that AI-driven content moderation processes we use are transparent, accountable and free from bias.

We commit to using AI in content curation to promote a diversity of perspectives, providing relevant and inclusive content to our audiences, while actively avoiding the reinforcement of echo chambers or perpetuate inequality.

We commit to calling on AI developers to design AI systems that prioritise data diversity and inclusivity, ensuring that marginalised and underrepresented groups are meaningfully included in algorithmic decision-making.

5. Centering people over technology

Assess the impact on roles: evaluate how AI implementation may affect staff positions and responsibilities and ensure that any transformation is managed with a people-first approach.

Support staff transition: provide training, upskilling and development opportunities to adapt to new technologies.

Balance automation and human touch: use AI to enhance, not replace, human expertise, creativity and interaction.

Examples in practice

We commit to ensuring that human oversight remains a central feature in all AI processes, ensuring accountability and enabling intervention in cases of error or harm.

We commit to ensuring that all AI systems are regularly audited and updated to meet evolving ethical standards and societal needs.

We commit to using AI in content production to enhance creativity and efficiency while ensuring that human oversight remains integral to the editorial process.

We commit to collaborative knowledge, learning and sharing, including with other media organisations, AI developers and policymakers to share knowledge and best practices in AI use, including its impact on people who utilise these tools.

We call on governments and regulatory bodies to establish clear guidelines and frameworks that support the ethical use of AI in media, while safeguarding freedom of the press and human rights.

6. Balancing the environmental impact of AI use

Recognise the energy demands of AI applications, especially those requiring significant computational power, and actively seek to minimise their carbon footprint.

Opt for AI tools that prioritise the reduction of environmental impact.

Embed sustainability considerations into procurement and operational policies pertaining to the deployment and use of AI tools.

Examples in practice:

We commit to integrating a climate and environmental lens into our strategy and implementation processes to promote mindful use of AI technologies and applications in everyday work.

We commit to engaging in collaborative knowledge sharing with other media organisations and our audiences to raise awareness about the environmental impact of AI. This includes supporting and highlighting marginalised narratives and counter-narratives on this pressing and intersecting topic.

Practical commitments

To realise these principles and values in practice and action, we propose to strive towards implementing the following:

- to learn, share, deliberate and empower as individuals and a collective about using AI ethically and responsibly through open and accessible dialogue, learning circles and lived experiences in relation to using AI in our everyday digital media work
- to utilise the power of digital media to influence narratives with our respective audiences, online and offline, to inform opinions, decisions and actions
- to co-document our stories of AI practice over time, for internal and external mutual reflection, on the varying trajectories and outcomes resulting from its application in digital media work and in the human experience of using the technology
- to operationalise ethical and responsible use by co-drafting and implementing a checklist to regularly monitor, course-correct, promote and ensure the ethical use of AI across various digital media tasks, processes and functions
- to produce evidence-backed research of both the positive and negative implications of AI in digital media spanning areas of information integrity and disorder, the displacement of media workers and the propagation of bias resulting from the use of AI in digital media processes and functions
- to collectively advocate with our peers and stakeholders in media ecosystems, where relevant, on minimising harms and promoting the ethical and responsible use of AI in digital media and by digital media actors, including donors and funders

We, the undersigned, believe that these actions – rooted in our shared values and principles – will ensure that as digital media makers, we remain both alert and informed about existing and forthcoming changes in AI and technology more broadly.

Together, we will continue to co-create, enable and sustain inclusive, safe and reliable digital media spaces for all.

Paris AI Summit 2025

Statement on Inclusive and Sustainable AI for People and the Planet

Restore development of AI technologies represents a major paradigm shift, impacting our citizens and societies in many ways. In line with the Paris Pact for People and the Planet and the principles that countries must have ownership of their transition strategies, we have identified priorities and launched concrete actions to advance the public interest and to bridge digital divides through accelerating progress towards the SDGs.

Our actions are grounded in principles of science and solutions, focusing on open AI models in compliance with countries' frameworks, and policy standards in line with international frameworks.

This Summit has highlighted the importance of reinforcing the diversity of the AI ecosystem**.** It has laid out an open, multistakeholder and inclusive approach that will enable AI to be human rights-based, human-centric, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy while also stressing the need and urgency to narrow the inequalities and assist developing countries in AI capacity-building.

We acknowledge existing multilateral initiatives on AI, including the United Nations General Assembly Resolutions, the Global Digital Compact, the UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of AI, the African Union Continental AI Strategy and the works of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the Council of Europe and European Union, as well as the G7, the Hiroshima AI Process and the G20.

We have affirmed the following main priorities:

- Promoting AI accessibility to reduce digital divides
- Ensuring AI is open, inclusive, transparent, ethical, safe, secure and trustworthy, taking into account international frameworks for all
- Making innovation in AI thrive by enabling conditions for its development, and avoiding the market concentration driving industrial recovery and development
- Encouraging AI deployment that positively shapes the future of work and labour markets and delivers opportunity for sustainable growth
- Making AI sustainable for people and the planet
- Reinforcing international cooperation to promote coordination in international governance

To deliver on these priorities:

- Founding members have launched a major Public Interest AI Platform and Incubator, to support, amplify and decrease fragmentation between existing public and private initiatives on Public Interest AI and address digital divides. The Public interest AI Initiative will sustain and support digital public goods and technical assistance and capacity building projects in data, model development, openness and transparency, auditing, computing, talent-sourcing, financing and collaboration to support and co-create a trustworthy AI ecosystem advancing the public interest of all, for all and by all
- We have discussed, at a Summit for the first time and in a multi-stakeholder format, issues related to AI and energy. This discussion has led to sharing knowledge to foster investments for sustainable AI systems (hardware, infrastructure and models), to promotie international discussion on AI and environment, to welcome an Observatory on the energy impact of AI with the International Energy Agency and to showcase energy-friendly AI innovation
- We recognise the need to enhance our shared knowledge on the impacts of AI in the job market though the creation of a network of Observatories to better anticipate AI's implications for workplaces, training and education, and to use AI to foster productivity, skills development, quality working conditions and social dialogue
- We recognise the need for inclusive multistakeholder dialogues and cooperation on AI governance.

We underline the need for a global reflection integrating, *inter alia*, questions of safety, sustainable development, innovation and respect of international laws including humanitarian law and human rights law, and the protection of human rights, gender equality, linguistic diversity, protection of consumers and of intellectual property rights.

We take note of efforts and discussions related to international fora where AI governance is examined.

As outlined in the Global Digital Compact, participants reaffirmed their commitment to initiate a Global Dialogue on AI governance and the Independent International Scientific Panel on AI, and to align ongoing governance efforts, ensuring complementarity and avoiding duplication.

We know that to harness the benefits of AI technologies to support our economies and societies depends on advancing trust and safety. To this end, we commend the role of the Bletchley Park AI Safety Summit and Seoul Summits that have been essential in progressing international cooperation on AI safety, and we note the voluntary commitments launched there.

We will keep addressing the risks of AI on information integrity and continue the work on AI transparency.

We look forward to the next AI milestones such as the Kigali Summit, the 3rd Global Forum on the Ethics of AI hosted by Thailand and UNESCO, the 2025 World AI Conference and the AI for Good Global Summit 2025 to follow up on our commitments and continue to take concrete actions aligned with a sustainable and inclusive AI.

Global Digital Justice Forum

The GDJF Johannesburg Communiqué: Now is the time to take action for Digital Justice

February 2025

The Global Digital Justice Forum, a coalition of civil society organisations from the Global Majority, decries the tightening stranglehold of political and corporate authoritarianism on the internet.

The unchecked power of the 'broligarchy'—a handful of Silicon Valley firms operating in sync with current US government leadership—signals a broader global threat to the international rules-based system, human rights, peace, sustainable development and ecological justice.

Digital spaces, once the exemplar of human expression and creativity, have become tools of surveillance, oppression and violence. Big Tech has blatantly pursued profits over people, emboldened by self-serving US trade and foreign policies.

The weaponisation of data and AI has already seen widespread job precarity, misinformation, war crimes, the climate catastrophe and more.

The current regime marks a new low in which the line between political and economic power is completely blurred. Companies like Meta, X and Google have shed even the pretence of caring about democracy, peace or human rights. Meanwhile, 2.5-billion people remain excluded from the real benefits of digital access, deepening global inequalities.

We refuse to accept a digital order dictated by corporate greed and state control. Instead, we demand a digital future that belongs to the people—one where digital infrastructures are not commodities, but the commons that individuals and communities nurture to determine their own technological destinies.

United in our commitment to global digital justice and rights, we claim this as a moment of opportunity. We call for:

- international solidarity for a new global digital constitutionalism—a digital order that is democratic, participatory, humane and cognisant of ecological justice
- principled action from governments and international organisations to formulate and enforce policies and laws that curb the monopolistic and extractive powers of corporations, protect individual and collective freedoms, and guarantee the rights of nature

- civic action worldwide to organise, speak out and defend the values of democracy, equity, human rights and justice

AI-Generated Photo

We must build a future where technology is harnessed to empower people and protect the planet.

Let’s reclaim the Internet as a space for justice, democracy and collective empowerment.

The statement has been signed and endorsed by over 150 organisations, individuals and collectives across the world, including the 34 GDJF members.

Join us in demanding a digital order that prioritises people over profit!