



Strategies for Internet Technology and Digital Rights Reporting

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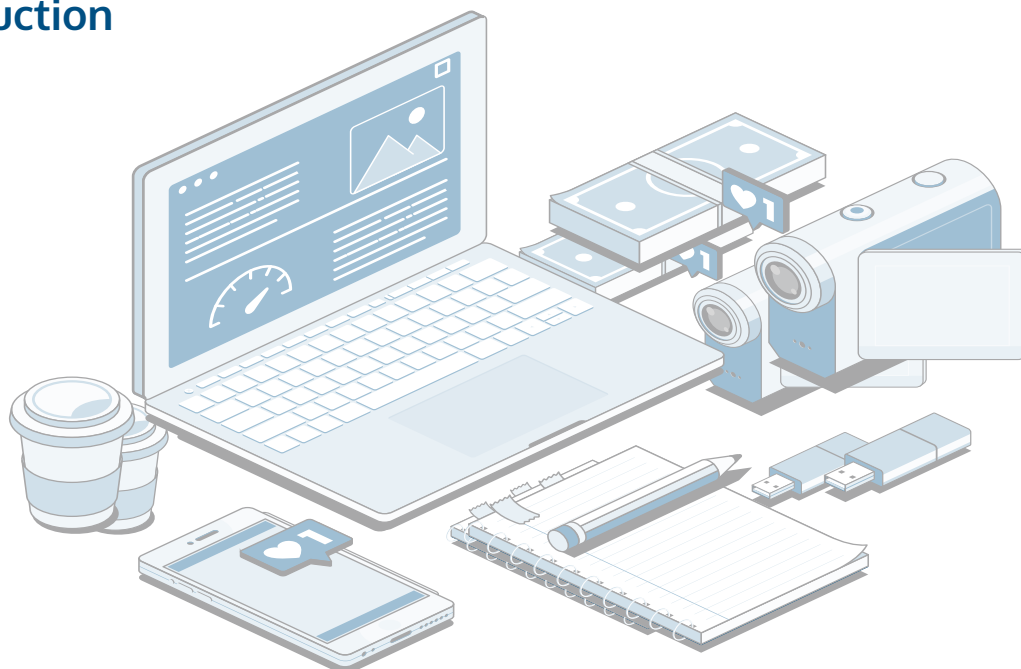
CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Background	4
Impact of Internet and Technology on the media industry: An Overview	7
Assessing journalists' capacity to report on Internet, Technology and Digital Rights	11
Challenges to reporting on Internet and Technology	17
Limited media freedom, muzzling of free speech and repression	24
Strategies and recommendations to improve specialised journalism in digital rights	26
Conclusion	30

Abbreviations

CIPESA	Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa
FOE	Freedom of Expression
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
MISA	Media Institute of Southern Africa
MOOCs	Massive open online course

Introduction



This research paper proffers strategies for promoting specialised journalism on internet, technology and digital rights in Southern Africa. The advent of digital technology and the widespread use of the internet, has radically transformed societies providing citizens with new avenues to exercise their constitutionally-guaranteed rights and freedoms. Significant gaps in digital rights literacy have been a hindrance to citizens' ability to recognise, claim and defend their digital rights (which are an extension of human rights that allow for use and access to the internet¹). Despite the digital rights literacy gaps, few journalists and media practitioners in the region have adequately or consistently provided information on, raised awareness about or explained/interpreted internet, technology and digital rights issues for citizens. One main reason for this is that reporting on technical fields such as internet and technology requires specialised² skills and competencies found beyond the traditional toolkits of journalists. In Africa, fields such as science and health communication, data journalism and climate change, have spawned various specialised journalism projects which develop the capacity and skills of journalists to cover technical themes.

Although vital lessons can be drawn from existing specialised journalism projects, it is important to note that media reporting on internet, technology and digital rights in Southern Africa is ³contingent on the contextual environment (e.g., the national media system, the role-models of journalists, the strength and diversity of national news media). In most Southern Africa contexts, obstacles in the form of authoritarian systems, restrictive laws, financial problems and corruption, lack of journalism

¹See Digital Rights Literacy in Southern Africa, <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/06/Digital-rights-literacy-in-Southern-Africa-2020.pdf> [accessed 03 October 2020]

²Noted by Cheruiyot, D., Baack, S., & Ferrer-Conill, R. (2019). Data journalism beyond legacy media: The case of African and European civic technology organizations. *Digital Journalism*, 7(9), 1215-1229.

³ibid

training and also violence against journalists, are routinely flagged by researchers⁴. For instance, Southern Africa countries including Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia feature in consecutive reports (e.g. the ⁵State of Internet Freedom Report 2020 and ⁶2019 Digital Rights in Africa report) that track digital violations, including digital rights related arrests perpetrated by governments. In such Southern Africa countries, the internet and its usage is increasingly perceived as a threat, leading to violations of citizens' digital rights (particularly freedom of expression) and victimisation of actors (such as journalists and news outlets) who highlight such violations.

Journalism in Southern Africa is also characterised by resource constrained newsrooms, ever-shifting communication ecologies due to technology, and realignment of the relationship between producers and consumers of content⁷. This realignment of the relationship between producers and consumers of content partly explains why ⁸journalism today is increasingly provided by a diverse set of actors both inside and outside of legacy (i.e traditional/mainstream) media organizations. For instance, researchers found that in mostly Sub-Saharan Africa, non-profit organizations are the leading voices of specialised journalism (particularly data journalism) often ⁹negotiating their roles between activism, advocacy, and journalism. Such non-profit organizations can be key stakeholders in promoting specialised journalism in internet, technology and digital rights issues. In proffering strategies to promote specialised journalism in internet, technology and digital rights, the paper maintains a bias towards mainstream/traditional media (i.e print, radio and television) actors in:

- assessing the capacity of mainstream media journalists to report on internet, technology and digital rights issues.
- considering the challenges encountered by mainstream media journalists in pursuing specialised journalism focused on internet, technology and digital rights.
- outlining the roles that various stakeholders can play to influence mainstream media coverage of internet, technology and digital rights issues in Southern Africa.

4Lublinski, J., Spurk, C., Fleury, J. M., Labassi, O., Mbarga, G., Nicolas, M. L., & Rizk, T. A. (2016). Triggering change—How investigative journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa contribute to solving problems in society. *Journalism*, 17(8), 1074-1094.

5See 'State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2020' report <https://cipesa.org/fifafrica/report-the-state-of-internet-freedom-in-africa-2020/> [Accessed 03 October 2020]

6See 'Digital rights in Africa Report 2019', published by Paradigm Initiative <https://paradigmhq.org/dra2019/> [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

7Mare, A., Mabweazara, H. M., & Moyo, D. (2019). "Fake News" and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda.

8Cheruiyot, D., Baack, S., & Ferrer-Conill, R. (2019). Data journalism beyond legacy media: The case of African and European civic technology organizations. *Digital Journalism*, 7(9), 1215-1229.

9ibid

Background

Recent developments in African communication ecologies show an expanding space for unique sets of non-journalistic actors who are now integrated into traditional news media in sourcing, data journalism projects and fact-checking¹⁰. In Southern Africa, digital rights are championed by non-journalistic actors within civil society who have borne a disproportionate burden of the required work in the context of what ought to be a multi-stakeholder effort¹¹. One reason civil society has been at the forefront of championing digital rights is that the¹²overwhelming instinct of many countries has been largely toward subordinating rights and access in order to retain political control over citizens by adopting Chinese and Russian models. These¹³ Chinese and Russian models of so called “rule of law” tactics typically involve violating citizens’ digital rights through legislation that is ostensibly written to promote law and order. Although the United Nations Human Rights Council asserts that “the same rights that people have offline must be protected online”¹⁴, its position is not legally binding hence individual countries decide how to handle digital rights. In several sub-Saharan Africa countries, digital rights are violated despite the¹⁵existence of a number of regional standards relevant to the protection of human rights on the Internet, such as the following:

- African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of 1981
- Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press of 1991
- the African Charter on Broadcasting of 2001
- Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa of 2002
- African Platform on Access to Information Declaration of 2011
- African Union Convention on Cyber-security and Personal Data Protection of 2014.

Digital rights include freedom of expression (FOE), internet access and affordability, right to information, privacy and personal data protection amongst others. In the wake of COVID-19, several governments in the region have placed restrictions to ostensibly contain the pandemic thus further impacting on digital rights. For instance, the governments of Zimbabwe and South Africa responded

10See CFP ‘African Digital Media Review’ (ADMR) (Issue No: 7) - Making News Outside Traditional Media: The Rise of Peripheral Actors in African Communication Ecologies

11See ‘Digital rights in Africa Report 2019’, published by Paradigm Initiative <https://paradigmhq.org/dra2019/> [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

12See ‘Digital rights in Africa Report 2019’, published by Paradigm Initiative <https://paradigmhq.org/dra2019/> [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

13ibid

14See ‘The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet’ https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

15See ‘African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms’ <https://africaninternetrights.org/en/declaration> [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

by enacting emergency laws that criminalised false information and threatened punitive sanctions against media houses found guilty of spreading false information on COVID-19. Meanwhile, Tanzania repealed and replaced its Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Regulations further exacerbating the crackdown on free speech. In Zambia authorities warned the public against circulating false information on social media platforms¹⁶.

It is important to note that when governments enacted emergency laws that criminalised journalism they failed to make the crucial distinction between disinformation and misinformation. Disinformation refers to ¹⁷situations where actors, driven by political and/or economic interests, deliberately produce and distribute information intended to disinform whilst misinformation refers to ¹⁸information that is inaccurate and/or false but where there is no intention to mislead. Making this distinction could have ensured nuance in enacting emergency laws as the¹⁹ category of misinformation extends to actors such as journalists who might unintentionally produce and/or spread misleading, inaccurate or false information, particularly in the wake of a global pandemic.

In Southern Africa, like elsewhere, the COVID-19 pandemic threw into sharp relief the existing inadequacies of mainstream media, particularly the lack of specialised journalism skills for science and health communication. Researchers found that in the rush to cover all aspects of the coronavirus pandemic, many mainstream news outlets reassigned reporters and editors with no background or expertise in science or health communication to the story ²⁰. Thus, ²¹ aside from getting to grips with the terminology, methodologies, and research on viruses and pandemics, there was the additional challenge of interpreting data such as national fatalities. Mainstream media practices like reassigning reporters and editors with no specialised journalism skills to cover technical or specialist themes also account for why internet, technology and digital rights issues are scantily covered in the region.

Study Rationale

The internet is becoming ever more critical to the full enjoyment of human rights and being disconnected poses ever greater obstacles ²²especially in the Southern African region, where many basic human rights are increasingly internet-enabled and facilitated by various communication technologies. Consequently, improved digital rights literacy amongst citizens is paramount. Given the

¹⁶See 'State of Internet Freedom in Africa 2020' report <https://cipesa.org/fifafrica/report-the-state-of-internet-freedom-in-africa-2020/> [Accessed 03 October 2020]

¹⁷See 2020 article on 'Data Journalism and Misinformation' by Oscar Westlund & Alfred Hermida, <http://www.alfredhermida.me/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Westlund-and-Hermida-2020-Data-Journalism-and-Misinformation-Accepted-version.pdf> [Accessed 20 November 2020]

¹⁸ibid

¹⁹ibid

²⁰ibid

²¹ibid

²²UNICEF Digital World Series: Access To The Internet and Digital Literacy https://www.unicef.org/csr/css/UNICEF_CRB_Digital_World_Series_ACCESS.pdf [Accessed 17 August 2020]

mainstream/mass media's crucial role in educating, influencing and informing publics, the regional study assesses how media practitioners and journalists have covered (or can better cover) internet, technology and digital rights issues in ways that enhance the digital literacy of citizens.

In particular, the study assesses the obstacles that media practitioners and journalists face in covering internet, technology and digital rights issues and proposes strategies and models that can be adopted to bridge the gaps. Apart from resource constraints, issues such as framing, editorial disinterest, media ownership can be complicating factors for internet, technology and digital rights reporting. These complicating factors necessitate multi-pronged interventions to entrench internet, technology and digital rights reporting as a 'specialised beat' in mainstream media.

Aims of the Study

- To provide a baseline which highlights the gaps and challenges impacting media reporting on internet, technology and digital rights issues.
- To provide a needs assessment for improving the quality (and frequency) of media reporting on internet, technology and digital rights issues.
- To provide an advocacy tool to inform the necessary interventions that can capacitate the media industry and its practitioners for reporting on ICT developments and digital rights.

Methodology

This paper is informed by qualitative data gathered through an online survey that was administered via [surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com). Participation in the online survey was requested via WhatsApp, Facebook and email. The survey comprised of 10 questions which invited 30 Southern Africa journalists to reflect on factors such as (i) capacity/skills; (ii) interest/preparedness; (iii) knowledge and attitudes of journalists to covering internet, technology and digital rights as well as (iv) the challenges and (v) possible solutions to improving reportage. Questions were designed to prompt journalists to reflect on mainstream media's effectiveness in reporting on internet, technology and digital rights within the region.

The paper used specialised journalism as a conceptual framework or lens to engage on the question of how media reporting on internet, technology and digital rights can be promoted. Literature review of studies on specialised journalism beats such as science journalism, investigative journalism and climate change journalism was conducted. Through the literature review, the study gleaned insights that illuminated some of the challenges that are encountered in specialised journalism. These insights provide a reliable yardstick for

assessing the level of difficulty in adopting internet, technology and digital rights reporting as a specialised beat. More importantly, the study also relied on empirical studies to identify possible strategies, models and best practices that can be adopted and/or adapted by journalists and the roles that stakeholders can play in the region.

Impact of Internet and Technology on the media industry: An Overview

The general consensus amongst media researchers and practitioners is that internet and technology have been disruptive to mainstream journalism practice. That digital disruption or impact has transformed Southern Africa's mainstream media in various ways including the following:

- transforming newsgathering practices
- restructuring of newsroom operations through convergence
- knock-on effects from dwindling advertising revenues
- triggering massive job cuts
- the decline in print readership owing to digital migration
- loss of potential online revenue owing to aggressive competition
- at times, content theft from online players
- adoption of video live streaming which creates new media audiences
- the rise of amateur and semi-professional content creators
- the growth of influential blogspheres and proliferation of social media particularly in urban settings
- the emergence of peripheral actors such as citizen journalists.

The global coronavirus pandemic has further exacerbated and accelerated the financial fragility of mainstream media organisations, many of whom have responded by suspending editions, laying off staff, reducing print pages, introducing staggered work rosters and operating with limited personnel whilst adjusting to working remotely. Lockdowns effected by governments to contain the spread of coronavirus also crippled revenues whilst mediums such as radio recorded increased listenership with more people having been forced to stay home. In addition, press freedom was significantly eroded, along with other digital rights, as authoritarian regimes used the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext to violate rights to access to information and freedom of expression²³, amongst others.

Influence of mobile technology in alternate news-making

Despite obstacles such as low internet penetration, unreliable connectivity and astronomical internet access costs, there has been mounting evidence that mobile technology is being used, to varying degrees, by citizens to contribute to news-making and information exchange in influential ways²⁴. By harnessing mobile technology for news-making and information exchange, citizens actively

²³Elaborated in 2020 State of Internet Freedom report by CIPESA

²⁴Paterson, C. (2013). Journalism and social media in the African context.

fill the information gaps that mainstream media, especially in repressive states, fail to address. Content generation through mobile phones includes videos, audios, images and text formats that are increasingly replacing and supplanting traditional media whilst mobile applications such as WhatsApp have emerged as formidable news distribution channels for media startups, who disseminate e-papers and other content through mobile devices. The impact of mobile technology serves to underscore the importance of digital rights especially internet affordability and access in Southern Africa.

Creation of new information flows and diversion/migration of news consumers

Beyond the mainstream media, the internet has facilitated new information flows through online platforms that circumvent state control, promoting freedom of expression and opening up communicative space. Southern Africa researchers²⁵ have maintained that the internet:

- Lowers the threshold for entry into the deliberative arena
- Reduces the fear of authoritarian regimes which normally induces self-censorship
- Facilitates new technologies that can be mobilizing tools both socially and politically
- Poses a threat to total government control of the media due to technological changes

The impact of these technological changes on the media industry include decline in readership for print as more news consumers rely on internet-enabled devices and online platforms to obtain and discuss news. Further, online platforms and social media, preempt and disrupt the news cycles by breaking news.

The internet has also facilitated a significant amount of news and comments that circulates among the Internet-connected in many parts of Southern Africa, where a plethora of blog-based conversations which reflect, and reflect upon, mainstream sources, but which also inform a particular politically engaged public quite independently of that mainstream²⁶.

In repressive political settings (e.g. in Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania²⁷) restrictive media laws, internet shutdowns and prohibitive licensing costs for online content generation are instituted despite the ACHPR principle requiring states to ensure non-interference with freedom of opinion. The rise in legislation aimed at regulating content online (under the guise of preventing 'social media abuse' in countries like Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe²⁸) as well as interception laws that can be deployed for surveillance thus violating the right to privacy, are also indicative of the impact of online platforms.

²⁵See (Ndlela, 2010; Moyo, 2007; Mazango, 2005)

²⁶ Paterson, C. (2013). Journalism and social media in the African context.

²⁷See 'Digital Rights in Africa' 2019 Report

²⁸See Freedom House, '2019 Freedom on the Net' country summaries

Reconfiguration of media operations, structures and business models

As mainstream media grapple with the pressures of embracing technology and innovation, serious modifications have been undertaken. For instance, mainstream media organisations are forced to restructure, streamline and even experiment with new business models in clear efforts to stay ahead of the curve²⁹ but they often lack the agility to rapidly transform. With revenues dwindling, mainstream media are resource constrained, which affects the quality of journalism as fewer funds are available to produce multi-sourced, analytical and in-depth reports whilst chasing stringent deadlines. Additionally, new technology use³⁰ is integrated unevenly into newsrooms, and there are major variations across the region with regards to problems of access whilst the lack of proper training constrains the use of technologies to their fullest. These realities account for why mainstream media has not invested in or focused on specialised journalism including internet, technology and digital rights reportage.

Apart from resource constraints that make it difficult for mainstream media to upskill and improve the digital skills of journalists, patterns of media ownership also interfere with news reporting, including coverage of digital rights violations. In countries like Zambia, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zimbabwe where the dominant media is state-controlled and the private press is muzzled, new communication technologies are credited with promoting access to information through mobile telephony, online media, citizen journalism, social media and vibrant blogospheres.

Media convergence, journalistic skills gaps and information overload

The mainstream media contends with challenges such as:

- the ³¹emergence of greater competition from peripheral actors or news sources
- the need for engagement with audiences and news consumers
- the accelerated news cycles owing to the immediacy of online content dissemination.

Moreover, mainstream media practitioners have to contend with the avalanche of information generated online. The emergence of ICTs provide new ways of documenting events and disseminating information as different forms of media converge on single platforms, such as having both the audio, videos, images and words in one story posted online³². This media convergence places additional

29See Mabweazara, H. M. (2015). African journalism in the “digital era”: Charting a research agenda. *African Journalism Studies*, 36(1), 11–17. doi:10.1080/23743670.2015.1008124

30See Berger, G. (2005). Powering African newsrooms: Theorising how Southern African journalists make use of ICTs for newsgathering. *Doing Digital Journalism: How Southern African Newsgatherers are using ICTs*, Grahamstown, Highway Africa, 1-14.

31See Research: “The more things change, the more they stay the same: The impacts of social media and digital technology on journalism quality in South African newsrooms” <https://ijec.org/2018/02/02/research-the-more-things-change-the-more-they-stay-the-same-the-impacts-of-social-media-and-digital-technology-on-journalism-quality-in-south-african-newsrooms/> [Accessed 16 September 2020]

32The Positive Role Of Information Communication Technologies In The Newsroom. <https://www.pmnewsnigeria.com/2019/05/18/the-positive-role-of-information-communication-technologies-in-the-newsroom/> [Accessed 16 September 2020]

pressure on journalists to become multi- skilled in generating content in a variety of formats.

With the advent of internet there has been a technological convergence of broadcasting, telecommunications and computers which has fundamentally altered the way in which broadcasting services are distributed to the consumers owing to increased speed of delivery, creation of new formats and the enablement of multi-channel distribution³³. Studies show that amongst urban populations the ³⁴radio market is on the decline, losing some of its market share to online streaming services that create competition for broadcasters as they attract music fans away from the radio listening base. Nevertheless, despite the advent of the internet and social media, radio remains extremely popular on the continent³⁵. However, in many countries, broadcast media is monopolised by governments who exercise control and can censor content relating to digital rights.

The indispensability of internet and technology in facilitating the exercise of human rights and enjoyment of basic freedoms, including digital ones, is beyond debate. What this paper is preoccupied with is strategies for media reporting on internet and technology in Southern Africa – and thus an assessment of the challenges faced by journalists and media practitioners is necessary.

Reduced viability and declining revenues in mainstream media

Africa has seen significant internet penetration growth, mainly because of a massive spike of internet users in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—between 2019 and 2020. The DRC's number of internet users increased by 9 million (+122%) facilitated by non-profit organizations and companies like Facebook, which have invested heavily in the development of Africa's internet connectivity³⁶. The rapid pace of digitalisation has significantly disrupted and eroded long-established sources of income for mainstream media such as marketing and advertising revenue. Notably, advertising revenue—the primary source of income for many media operations—is shifting to online platforms and their associated technology companies³⁷. Thus, the advent of technology has threatened the financial sustainability of mainstream media.

The closure or downscaling of newspapers and the financial pressures on broadcast news reporting are having a damaging effect on media freedom since quality journalism (particularly specialised journalism) is becoming harder to sustain, let alone develop and expand and this inevitably weakens democracy as a whole³⁸. Whilst authoritarian regimes are most commonly blamed for violating media rights, it could be argued that sustainability challenges will ultimately pose just as much of a threat to press freedom³⁹.

33Ndlela, M. N. (2007). Broadcasting reforms in Southern Africa: continuity and change in the era of globalization.

34 See 'Radio loses market share to online streaming services' <https://www.pwc.co.za/en/press-room/radio-loses-market-share-to-online-streaming-services.html> [Accessed 16 September 2020]

35 See '#WorldRadioDay: Why radio is still going strong in Africa' <https://www.dw.com/en/worldradioday-why-radio-is-still-going-strong-in-africa/a-52355828> [Accessed 16 September 2020]

36 See 'These are the countries where internet access is lowest' <https://cutt.ly/vhEffQK> [Accessed 20 November 2020]

37 See 'Namibia's Media: Facing the Digital Challenge' via https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Dietrich_Remmert/publication/341521489_Namibia's_Media_Facing_the_Digital_Challenge/links/5ec7aa77299bf1c09ad28c80/Namibias-Media-Facing-the-Digital-Challenge.pdf [accessed on 16 September 2020]

38 See, UNESCO, World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: 2017/2018 Global Report. 2018, 13-4

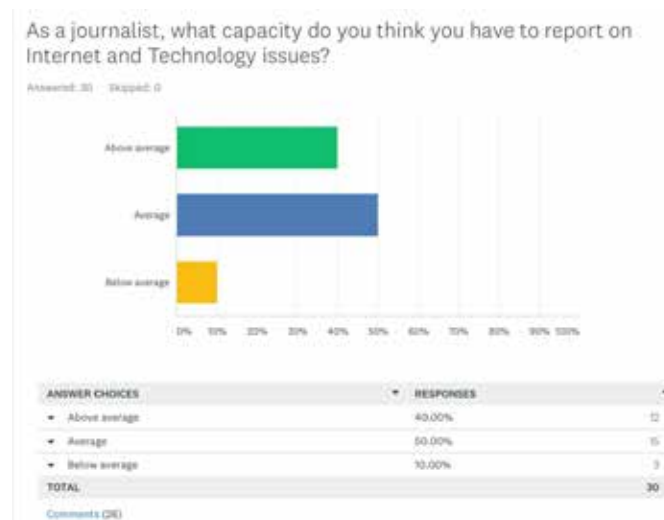
39 Ibid., 20-1

Assessing journalists' capacity to report on Internet, Technology and Digital Rights

At a time when specialised journalism (including internet, technology and digital rights reportage) are needed the most, the capacity of mainstream media journalists and news outlets to meet the challenge is uncertain. To get a sense of the capacity of mainstream journalists, an online survey with journalists from Zambia, Malawi, Botswana, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe participating.

Lack of specialist reporting skills for internet and technology reporting

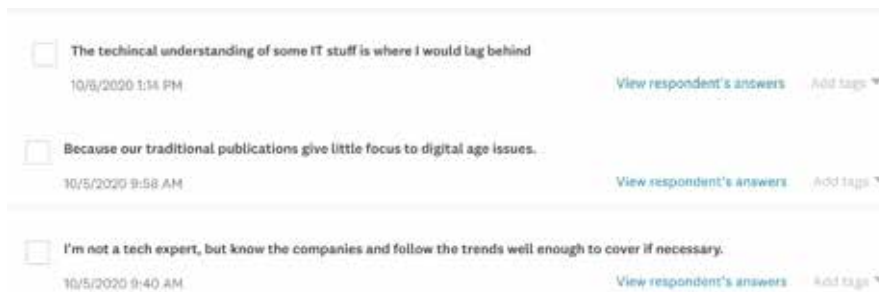
The first survey question required that respondents self-evaluate their capacity to report on internet and technology issues.



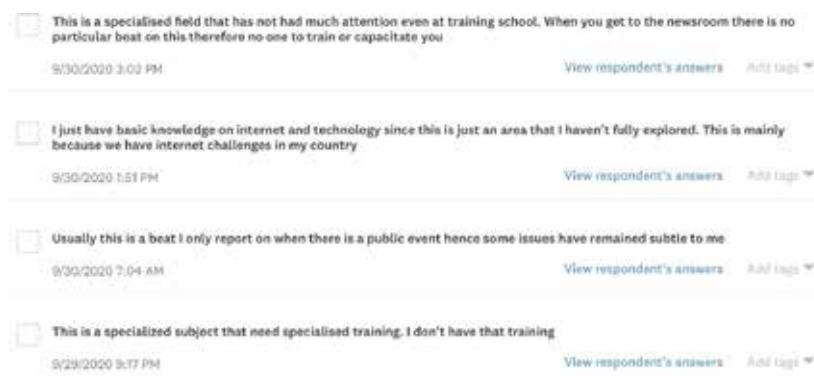
Half of the survey respondents self-evaluated as 'average' in reporting on internet and technology issues. This self-evaluation is consistent with contexts where most mainstream journalists can be classified as generalists. When ⁴⁰general reporters are assigned to cover topics such as technology they often lack essential knowledge and specialist reporting skills.

In elaborating on why they rated their capacity as 'average' respondents gave some of the following responses:

⁴⁰See, Nguyen, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Science journalism for development in the Global South: A systematic literature review of issues and challenges. *Public Understanding of Science*, 28(8), 973-990.



When generalist reporters are entrusted with covering internet and technology issues they often don't provide context, nuance or analysis because they tend to conceptualise and develop stories on the basis of available research reports, press releases or events⁴¹. Survey respondents reinforced these observations as follows:

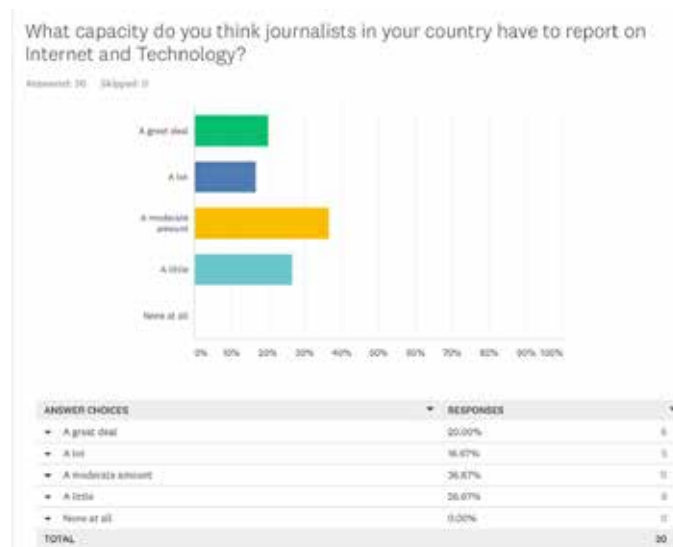


40% of the survey respondents indicated that they had above average capacity because they had previous experience with exposure to or some training in ICT. Consequently, they brought their technical background to their reporting.

41 Paraphrasing, Massarani, L (2014) Science communication in Latin America: What is going on? Science Museum Group Journal 2014(2). Available at: <http://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/browse/issue-02/science-communication-in-latin-america/> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

- I was exposed to the internet and technology in my early years as a journalist, around 1994 when the company I used to work for computerised and introduced new technologies. Since then I have never looked back.
10/6/2020 12:07 PM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags
- I am qualified and understand ICT.
10/6/2020 11:27 AM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags
- As a university trained journalist, I have been taught on what areas to focus on when considering issues of how the internet and technology intersect with the wider society. However, the challenge is that technology changes almost everyday which means that I keep on having to do catch up. This makes sure that my ability to report on the internet and technology is always above average.
10/5/2020 10:30 AM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags
- I have worked as an ICT Tutor and also have the requisite qualifications and understanding of issues surrounding ICTs. On the side, I've worked as an ICT consultant.
9/29/2020 4:02 PM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags
- Besides what I've self taught by using the internet and various ICTs, I've had the opportunity to attend digital technology workshops that have sharpened my knowledge in the field. This gives me the upper hand when reporting on internet and technology issues.
9/29/2020 2:07 PM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags
- I worked for an technology company for almost a decade which gave more deeper appreciation of the business behind technology companies.
9/23/2020 11:02 AM [View respondent's answers](#) Add tags

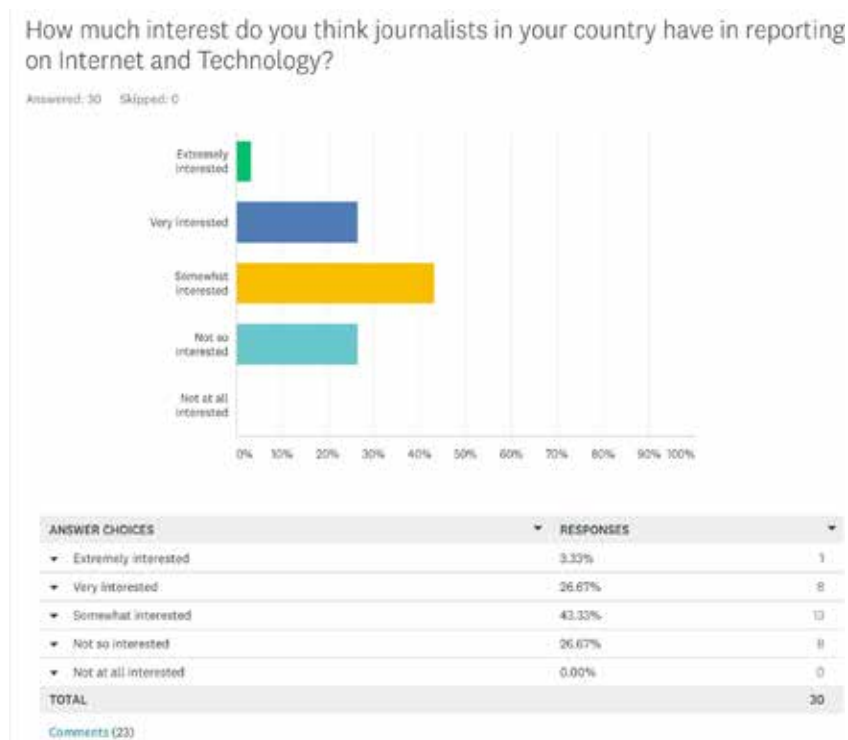
The fact that more than half of the respondents indicated that they and their compatriots had moderate or limited capacity to report effectively on internet and technology, is a strong indicator of a knowledge and skills gap to engage in this type of specialised journalism.



Lack of interest in internet and technology reporting

Apart from lack of skills to cover internet and technology issues another challenge is that these themes have a low status within newsrooms. For the most part, specialised journalism takes a back

seat in daily newsroom operations as editors do not often perceive these themes as ‘selling’⁴². It is thus unsurprising that more than half of survey respondents indicated that journalists in their respective countries showed mild to minimal interest in internet and technology reporting.



- Editors usual shun such specialise reporting hence the attitude reporters have**
9/30/2020 3:02 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- The interest to report is there but what pulls them down is the erratic availability of internet itself and generally issues of technology are not everyone's cup of tea when it comes to choice of stories to read or listen to**
9/30/2020 1:51 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

⁴²Paraphrasing Nguyen, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Science journalism for development in the Global South: A systematic literature review of issues and challenges. *Public Understanding of Science*, 28(8), 973-990.

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- It is not a beat that's likely to land you a frontpage byline and so it doesn't really appeal for career progression
10/7/2020 6:16 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

 - Journalists in my country tend to fall over each other running for the political story, so there seem to be little interest in reporting on the internet and technology. I would say the only time journalists are interested in the internet and technology is probably when they experience system failure in putting together or sending their stories!
10/6/2020 12:07 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

 - There is a small pool of reporters who are interested. Beyond that, not so much. It's definitely not mainstream.
10/5/2020 9:40 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

 - Journalists in my country are less interested in reporting on Internet and Technology because most readers aren't well versed on technology thus it makes them less interested in such news.
9/29/2020 7:56 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

 - Most newsrooms are lagging behind in technology hence the constrained reporting because journalist must first embrace the great achievement tech is bringing to the newsroom before they can fully report on it
9/29/2020 5:56 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

 - You see with the number of stories that cover the Internet and Technology, there are few and far in between. It's only when the minister is launching or opening ICT centres at schools, or when they are discussing Cyber Security and Data Protection Bill that is when stories surrounding ICTs are published.
9/29/2020 4:52 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#) ▼

These responses indicate that there is low editorial commitment to specialised journalism, which would extend to reporting on internet, technology and digital rights.

Lack of knowledge of internet and technology issues

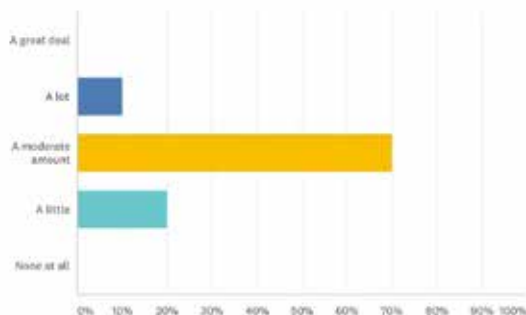
70% of the respondents in the survey indicated that journalists in their respective countries were not knowledgeable enough to report on internet and technology issues. Respondents intuitively discerned that there was a difference between a knowledge gap and a skills gap.

Although,⁴³ the expectations of the industry veer towards the overly optimistic and unrealistic demand that the reporter should be able to turn his or her hand to anything – 90% of the respondents admitted that most journalists lack the requisite knowledge to pursue specialised journalism in internet and technology issues.

⁴³See Turner, B., & Orange, R. (Eds.). (2013). Specialist journalism. Routledge.

Do you think journalists in your country are knowledgeable enough to report on Internet and Technology issues?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
A great deal	0.00% 0
A lot	10.00% 3
A moderate amount	70.00% 21
A little	20.00% 6
None at all	0.00% 0
TOTAL	30

Most respondents did not show confidence in their own and their peers’ mastery of internet and technology-related matters. Individual agency appears to play a big role in the choice to cover specialised beats as journalists that desire to learn, tend to find ways of doing so by independently researching on and familiarising themselves with the subject.

- There's somewhat an information gap when it comes to the internet and technology in the country in general. This is bound to reflect in the journalism field. You would have to be very interested in technology to equip yourself further.
 9/29/2020 2:37 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

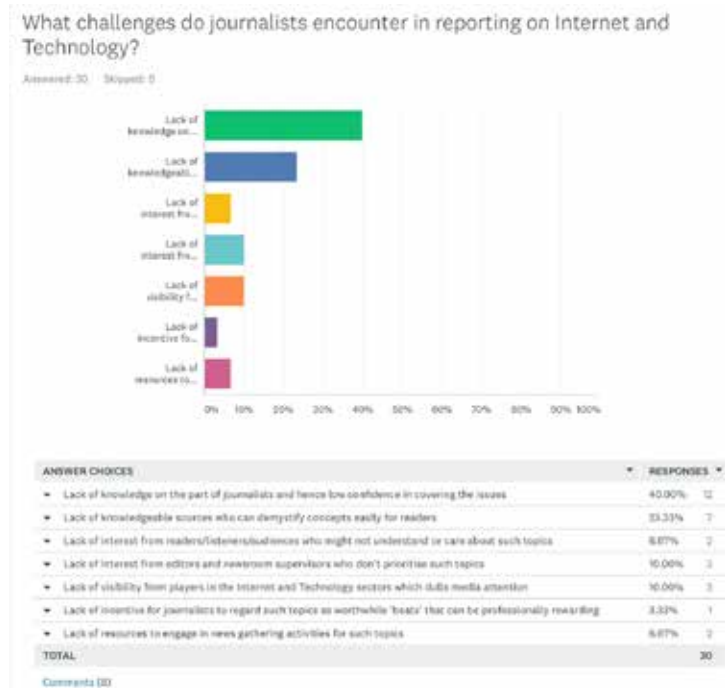
- The mainstream journalists are still following the traditional reporting styles, only the radical have jumped into online reporting
 9/29/2020 2:26 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

- Like I said it's a highly technical area and newsrooms tend to focus on stories to do with bread and butter issues, that is stories about food, health and transport etc and not on the latest app or cellphone
 9/29/2020 1:15 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

- There is very little interest in mainstream media to cover technology extensively. The country only has one dedicated tech website, which itself has coloured its tech coverage with political reporting over recent years
 9/29/2020 11:02 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

Supposing journalists are interested in covering internet and technology issues and that media outlets are willing to introduce it as a specialist beat, there are challenges to overcome – some of which have already been alluded to.

Challenges to reporting on Internet and Technology



- Even audiences sometimes have no interest as this is a beat that hasn't been really explored and explained to the reader
8/30/2020 7:04 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- I think the above list is exhaustive
8/29/2020 5:58 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- Most of the issues raised above are some of the challenges faced by journalist
8/29/2020 4:50 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- Editors also demand stories that sell and attract more eyeballs on digital platforms and believe that technology stories do not tick that box
8/29/2020 3:15 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

Lack of knowledgeable sources and disinterested newsroom supervisors

Journalists rely on sources to gather information and often defer to subject experts who can help unpack the technical aspects of the subject matter. If journalists have limited access to knowledgeable sources and work under supervisors who are not keen on internet and technology, they become

disincentivised from reporting on it. Specialised journalism tends to get ⁴⁴allocated comparatively little space and often used as space/time fillers, rarely as leading news items, and occasionally left out to give the space for last-minute paid advertisements.

Studies have found that ⁴⁵convincing editors to do a story has been cited as the most formidable daily challenge to specialist journalists in the South, in addition to poor working conditions, such as low pay and excessive work pressures. Hence to win editors' favour, specialist reporters often have to focus heavily on 'newsworthy' topics or 'selling' aspects of events or issues – those which either involve a high level of novelty, drama and controversy or are at the heart of daily concerns. This suggests that newsroom managers' attitude and willingness are a great determining factor with regard to prioritising or marginalising media reporting on internet and technology issues.

Similar concerns were noted by respondents in ranking the challenges faced in internet and technology reporting:

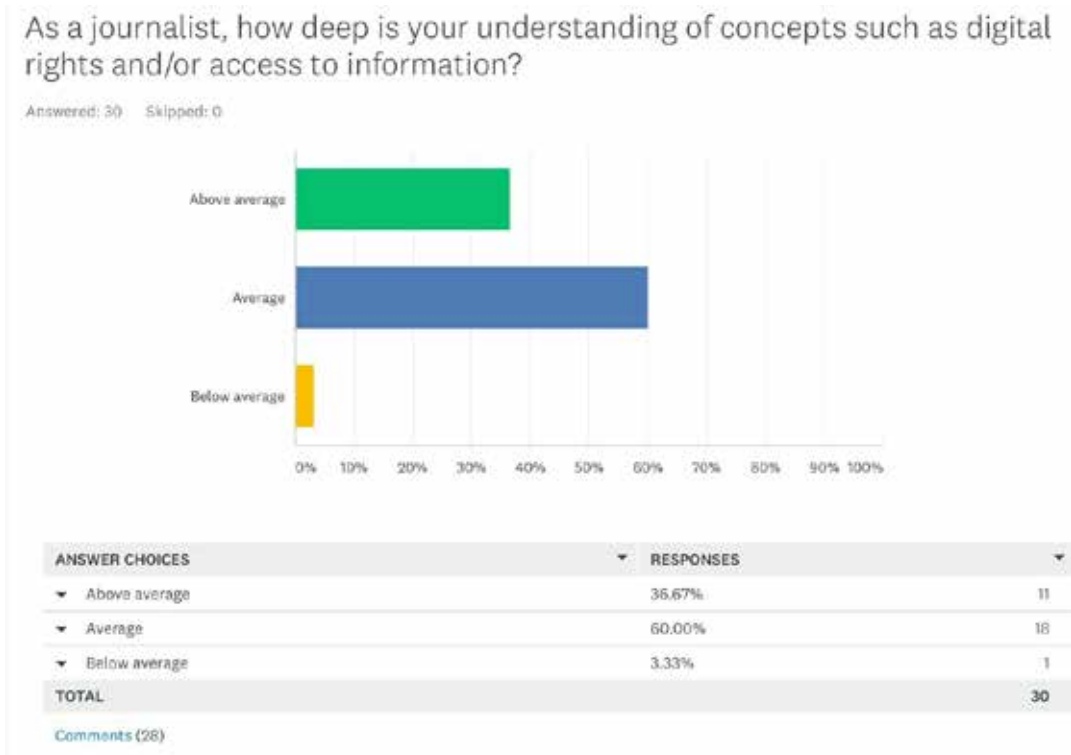
- All of the above contribute but mainly in newsrooms it is supervisors who influence such decisions.
10/7/2020 6:25 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- It is not easy to cover a beat if you dont really know it well, you wont be confident.
10/7/2020 6:16 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- Journalists are afraid of tackling the technology beat because they have little understanding of it.
10/6/2020 12:07 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)
- The other one could be that our country is not well connected to the world and top technological countries and it takes time to access and be 'on the loop' about some technological developments.
10/1/2020 12:32 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

Lack of issue-oriented news reporting

Researchers on specialised journalism beats such as health and climate change reporting have remarked on the lack of issue-oriented reporting, that is reporting which can sustain the public interest as it connects with issues that those publics care about.

44 Paraphrasing Nguyen, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Science journalism for development in the Global South: A systematic literature review of issues and challenges. *Public Understanding of Science*, 28(8), 973-990.

45 Ibid., 2019



News about ICT, internet or technology tends to ⁴⁶peak during special events (e.g. International Day for Universal Access to Information) or during short periods of intense debates, (e.g. when debates on legal bills that relate to internet are underway).

Most of the respondents indicated that they had an average understanding of concepts such as digital rights and access to information. This is a gap because journalists must have relevant expertise to process, analyze, interpret and present the internet and technology themes so as to improve the digital rights literacy of citizens.

When asked to elaborate on whether they felt an understanding of such concepts was relevant to their audiences, respondents commented that:

46 Paraphrasing Nguyen, A., & Tran, M. (2019). Science journalism for development in the Global South: A systematic literature review of issues and challenges. *Public Understanding of Science*, 28(8), 973-990.

<input type="checkbox"/>	I don't think it is relevant, because the audience don't know technology as well	9/29/2020 11:49 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	It is the most important thing to do. For a journalist to be able to simplify news to the audience they have to have vast understanding of the issues they report on	9/29/2020 11:35 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	One can only report well on what they know of and journalists are expert to have a great command of any subject that they turn their attention to.	9/29/2020 11:34 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	Understanding these concepts is the basis for developing an interest, which will lead to more coverage of these issues.	10/6/2020 12:07 PM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	yes	10/6/2020 11:27 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	Very much. It allows me to double check facts before presenting them to my readers. The concepts help to avoid internet or computer misuse.	10/5/2020 9:58 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼
<input type="checkbox"/>	Yes. understanding the concept will enable us to disseminate the information to a more palatable state and hence make it more interesting for the readers	10/5/2020 9:48 AM	View respondent's answers	Add tags ▼

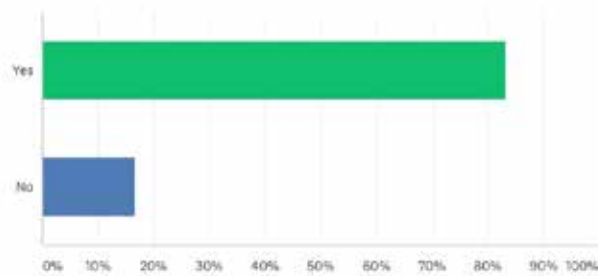
The responses indicated contradicting attitudes towards the value of informing or educating the public about concepts related to internet and technology, such as digital rights and access to information. Whilst some respondents felt duty-bound to empower their audiences with information relating to digital rights and similar issues, just a few implied that the news consumers might not be interested anyway. Nonetheless, Michael Schudson argues that, through specialised journalism, the press can serve as a stand-in for the public, holding the leaders accountable – not to the public (which is not terribly interested), but to the ideals and rules of the democratic polity itself⁴⁷.

Therefore, even if it were the case that Southern Africa's citizenry is indifferent to internet and technology issues (including digital rights) the media would still have a duty to inform and to hold governments accountable for digital rights violations.

⁴⁷Cited in, Ettema, J. S. (2009). New media and new mechanisms of public accountability. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 10(3), 319–321. doi:10.1177/1464884909102591

If reporting on Internet and Technology was turned into a 'beat' within your media house - would you volunteer for that assignment?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	83.33%	25
No	16.67%	5
TOTAL		30

Comments (26)

Although the majority of respondents gave affirmative responses, 16% indicated that they would not be keen to cover the internet and technology beat

I feel there isnt a lot of appetite or interest internally so even if you do the story it might not be used.
10/7/2020 6:16 AM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

Not my area of interest
10/6/2020 1:14 PM [View respondent's answers](#) [Add tags](#)

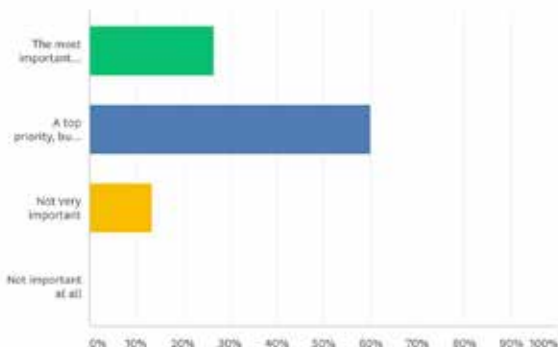
Commercialisation of the newsrooms

They can be attributed to the fact that news has become a commercial product that is shaped, packaged and marketed with a constant eye for profits, thus mainstream media are businesses dedicated to presenting information within the parameters of profitability⁴⁸. Media owners and editors push journalists to look for stories that sell the paper and, in most cases, they view internet and technology related stories as unprofitable.

48 See, Howley, K. (2005). Community media: People, places, and communication technologies. Cambridge University Press. https://www.academia.edu/670751/Community_Media_People_Places_and_Communication_Technologies [Accessed 18 September 2020]

If you were an editor, where/how would you rank reporting on Internet and Technology in your list of priorities?

Answered: 30 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
The most important priority	26.67% 8
A top priority, but not the most important	60.00% 18
Not very important	13.33% 4
Not important at all	0.00% 0
TOTAL	30

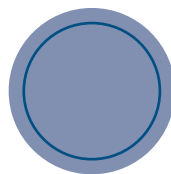
[Comments \(20\)](#)

The commercialisation of newsrooms can influence journalists to focus on stories they know are preferred by their editors and neglect those topics which might not sell. 60% of the respondents in the online survey acknowledged that reporting on internet and technology is a top priority but not the most important. This is because internet, technology and digital rights stories are seen as niche type of reportage that does not attract much readership compared to general news stories.

The commercialisation aspect is also a driving factor in western contexts. For instance, the decision by CNN to cut its entire science, technology and environment news staff provoked widespread alarm when it was announced in 2008, but it was duly defended from a profit-making view in managerial accounts stressing ‘efficiency gains’, ‘multi-skilling’, ‘repurposing’, ‘convergence synergies’ and related priorities⁴⁹. In Southern Africa, resource constrained newsrooms raise similar defences of streamlining the business operations, introducing convergence and insisting on repurposing of tools as well as multi-skilling of personnel, thus sacrificing specialist journalism beats such as internet and technology.

⁴⁹See, Allan, S. (2011). Introduction. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 12(7), 771–777. doi:10.1177/1464884911412688

It is important to note that any media that is operating in a market-driven environment does not (in the words of McManus, 1994:218) , ‘serve the primary purpose of news, which is to explain how the environment is working so that citizens are empowered to make good decisions, particularly civic decisions.’ Be that as it may, such a market-driven status quo can present an opportunity for organisations doing advocacy to leverage their advertising muscle and develop relationships with key media stakeholders to amplify stories relating to internet, technology and digital rights, for example through the publishing of sponsored articles. However there are still drawbacks particularly in countries where the dominant media is state-controlled. This is because state-controlled media are likely to censor any advertorial material that does not align with the political interests they are serving. In Southern African countries like Zambia⁵⁰ and Mozambique⁵¹, for instance, government has been known to threaten to or actually withhold advertising to private media as punishment for reportage they don’t like.



serve the primary purpose of news, which is to explain how the environment is working so that citizens are empowered to make good decisions, particularly civic decisions.

⁵⁰ African Media Barometer 2017 <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/africa-media/14071.pdf> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

⁵¹ Freedom in the World 2020, Mozambique <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mozambique/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

Limited media freedom, muzzling of free speech and repression

The regulatory and policy environments obtaining in some Southern Africa countries makes the practice of journalism perilous as there is no media freedom in practical terms, even in instances where such freedoms are constitutionally guaranteed.

For example, Freedom House noted that in Zambia⁵²,

- self-censorship remains rife
- outlets that are perceived as aligned with the opposition are subject to arbitrary closure by authorities
- critical journalists risk damage to equipment, frivolous lawsuits, arrest, and harassment by the government and political party supporters

Freedom House also notes that in Tanzania⁵³,

- independent journalists and media outlets are subject to harsh repression
- according to the Media Council of Tanzania, violations of press freedom were more than three times more prevalent in 2019 than in 2015, when current President John Magufuli took office.

In Zimbabwe⁵⁴,

- the government is intolerant of critical online commentary and activism
- the State often invokes vaguely written laws to arrest users
- online journalists and ICT users face regular harassment, intimidation, and violence for their online activities.

In Swaziland⁵⁵,

- the state broadcaster is tightly controlled by the government
- the Swazi Observer, a major newspaper, is effectively owned by the king
- journalists often face harassment, assault, and intimidation

⁵²See, Freedom in the World 2020 Zambia <https://freedomhouse.org/country/zambia/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

⁵³See, Freedom in the World 2020 Tanzania <https://freedomhouse.org/country/tanzania/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

⁵⁴Freedom on the Net 2019 Zimbabwe <https://freedomhouse.org/country/zimbabwe/freedom-net/2019#B> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

⁵⁵Freedom in the World 2020 Eswatini <https://freedomhouse.org/country/eswatini/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

- self-censorship is reportedly common.

In Mozambique⁵⁶,

- journalists frequently experience government pressure, harassment, and intimidation, which encourages self-censorship
- the government is known to retaliate against journalists who criticize it by cancelling public advertising contracts
- journalists and political commentators appearing on television programs have been the targets of attacks and kidnappings in recent years.

Since ⁵⁷many governments are taking steps that undermine internet access and affordability, they weaken the potential of digital technologies to catalyse free expression and civic participation or to drive innovation. Journalists and media practitioners who step up to cover internet and technology issues particularly digital rights, can easily become targets.

According to the 2019 Digital Rights in Africa Report, there were three major themes dominating discussions across the continent,

- continued Internet shutdowns
- attacks on press freedom
- pushback against digital rights abuses.

The pushback has been mainly driven by civil society organisations and activists who ‘have borne a disproportionate burden of the required work in the context of what ought to be a multi-stakeholder effort’ ⁵⁸. Given that ‘the media do not operate in isolation of other institutions in society⁵⁹’ it is time for media players in the region to consider collaborating on driving internet and technology as well as digital rights advocacy. Thus far, citizens in Southern Africa have been gradually fighting for themselves – without limited or no media influence – to push for more internet freedom within their respective countries.

⁵⁶Freedom in the World 2020, Mozambique <https://freedomhouse.org/country/mozambique/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 17 September 2020]

⁵⁷See, CIPESA reports for 2018 and 2019

⁵⁸See ‘Digital rights in Africa Report 2019’, published by Paradigm Initiative <https://paradigmhq.org/dra2019/> [Accessed on 16 September 2020]

⁵⁹Muneri, C. T. (2019). Prospects for Data Journalism in Zimbabwe: Challenges of Engendering a Democratic Society and an Informed Citizenry in the Digital Age. In *Data Journalism in the Global South* (pp. 39-52). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Strategies and recommendations to improve specialised journalism in digital rights

Several challenges deterring specialised journalism in internet, technology and digital rights have been flagged in this paper. Some challenges, like the lack of specialist skills and lack of knowledge appear to have simple solutions e.g training or retraining. Whereas there are other challenges that repel easy solutions including ⁶⁰ political pressures, economic constraints, and an unsympathetic legal environment, being prevalent in Southern Africa.

The following are strategies and recommendations informed by a review of specialised journalism initiatives in the region as well as perspectives shared in a survey conducted with regional journalists on what would be required to promote internet, technology and digital rights reporting.

Addressing the knowledge gap in internet and technology reporting

Stakeholders such as MISA can play a role in promoting specialised journalism in internet, technology and digital rights reporting by:

Developing free resources for journalists in the region

- Funding and/or commissioning the development of toolkits and other resources on how to cover internet, technology and digital rights. Such resources can be packaged in PDF, video and audio formats that are compatible with WhatsApp to make them more accessible. To sustain journalists' interest in using the resources (e.g completing modules) MISA can attach consideration for other opportunities (such as training, workshops, etc) to the completion of such modules.
- Partnering with journalism training institutions and universities to develop massive open online courses (MOOCs) on how to cover internet, technology and digital rights. To increase uptake of the free resources, it would be beneficial to engage journalism training institutions to make free resources compulsory components of their curricular or adapting them to their existing offerings as specialisations. Wherever possible, it would be ideal to facilitate some certification or accreditation for MOOCs (and similar resources) to make the taking and completing of such modules more appealing to journalists who will find them useful for future academic or career progression.

⁶⁰Schiffirin, A., & Behrman, M. (2011). Does training make a difference? Evaluating journalism training programs in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, 66(4), 340-360.

Creating a network of internet, technology and digital rights media practitioners

- Making a Call for Applications inviting media practitioners throughout the region to join a network to report on internet, technology and digital rights in Southern Africa. In order to expand the number of media practitioners specialising in internet, technology and digital rights, it is important to identify individuals who will be committed to the process of acquiring skills and crucially, using those skills. It is safe to assume that those who respond to the Call for Applications will, at the very least, demonstrate interest in covering digital rights. In addition, completion of a module in one of the free resources (proposed above, and assuming these have been developed) can be used as a further indicator of an applicant's investment/interest in digital rights reporting. This network can offer services to its members, including organising knowledge exchange forums (seminars, workshops, fellowships) for members.

Building capacity of mainstream and online journalists, and peripheral actors

- Civil society, journalists' unions and editors' associations are some of the stakeholders that play an active role in media training through various collaborations and funded by agencies from Western countries. Participants for training can be drawn from the network (proposed above) but must inclusive catering for journalists from mainstream media, online platforms and those who are peripheral actors. Since recent developments show an expanding space for unique sets of non-journalistic actors who are now integrated into traditional news media in sourcing, data journalism projects and fact-checking. The inclusion of peripheral actors such as interlopers (i.e. those challenging the journalism field such as bloggers or citizen journalists) is vital. Through the (proposed) network, stakeholders can support initiatives such as training, collaborative projects, media fellowships and mentorship programmes.

Building momentum around digital rights reporting

Stakeholders in the private sector and non-profit organisations can play a role in promoting specialised journalism in internet, technology and digital rights reporting by:

Making internet, technology and digital rights a lucrative beat

- Private sector players can sponsor the production and dissemination of content on internet, technology and digital rights themes that may further their own business goals, through raising visibility and awareness of digital services, products, platforms and technologies that intersect with digital rights. For instance, banks would benefit from informed consumers on matters relating to the digital economy i.e economic transactions that occur on the internet. Telecom companies can sponsor content on topics such as financial inclusion through mobile money whilst consumer watchdogs can propagate digital consumer rights vis a vis internet costs and internet service standards, etc. Sponsored content from private sector players may be advertorial

in nature but it would still serve a purpose in raising awareness about internet and technology generally, whilst themes centred wholly on digital rights can be tackled by media practitioners. Another drawback of having private sector players sponsor content is that it can inhibit media players from being critical so as to preserve good relations. However, in the short term, private sector players can use their financial muscle to make internet, technology and digital rights reporting a lucrative the beat in the region. In addition, private sector players can sponsor journalism/media awards for coverage of internet-related stories which appear in newspapers, radio or TV, blogs or podcasts produced in mainstream or online media, or by peripheral actors. These actions would normalise internet, technology and digital rights reporting as a beat.

Raising the profile of internet, technology and digital rights as a beat

- Stakeholders in the private sector and non-profit sector can raise the profile of internet, technology and digital rights as a beat. By collaboratively hosting high-profile publicity events, such as conferences, such players can attract elite newsmakers such as captains of industry, experts, government officials and policymakers whose work aligns with internet, technology and digital rights. High profile events generate media coverage because of the participation of hard to access elite sources, the low costs of newsgathering and the opportunity for media to network with and cultivate knowledgeable sources. Foreign non-profit entities that fund media development can raise the profile of internet, technology and digital rights by funding that beat or commissioning media practitioners to report on those themes. Foreign donor-funded journalism is not new to the region as many development assistance programmes and fellowships designed to address the skills deficits and logistical needs of journalists and media in Africa exist, Notable examples include the Mail & Guardian's largest specialist desk,⁶¹ Bhekisisa which is more than thrice the size of the political desk. It was initially funded through a grant from the German government (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit - GIZ) and is now bankrolled by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation⁶². Such donor-funded journalism projects raise the profile of the beat that is benefiting from the expanded resources, hence internet, technology and digital rights reporting can be enhanced by investments from non-profits that can fund it. It is vital for ⁶³NGOs and donors to gain a stronger understanding of the operational environment, resources and/or work practices of media actors prior to engaging in a media development project.

Subsidising internet, technology and digital rights reporting

Stakeholders in the non-profit sector can help subsidise the cost of newsgathering for internet,

⁶¹The Bhekisisa Centre raises and administers its own funds for essential costs such as staff salaries, reporting trips and equipment and is a separately registered nongovernmental organisation, according to Malan.

⁶²See Malan, M. (2018). Quid Pro Quo: How Donor-Funded Journalism Redefines Job Descriptions. *African Journalism Studies*, 39(2), 121–129. doi:10.1080/23743670.2018.1468347

⁶³See McCurdy, P. M., & Power, G. (2007). Journalism education as a vehicle for media development in Africa: The AMDI project. *Ecquid Novi*, 28(1-2), 127-147.

technology and digital rights reportage by providing information subsidies. Information subsidies⁶⁴ refer to pre-packaged news produced by PR specialists (or communications specialists) and used by journalists to save on time and the cost of reporting. Other stakeholders who can aid in subsidising specialised journalism include ⁶⁵academics and professionals with existing subject matter expertise who can be trained to pitch stories to news organizations as freelance journalists covering their own disciplines. When journalists and media outlets can rely on information subsidies (e.g from academics and experts), they also benefit from “verification subsidies,” which reduce the time needed to do original reporting and verification.

Create an enabling environment for reporting on internet, technology and digital rights

In August 2020, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Heads of State and Government resolved, at an Ordinary Summit, to take pre-emptive measures against external interference, the impact of fake news and abuse of social media particularly in electoral processes. Whilst it is important to curb fake news,

Governments in Southern Africa can create an enabling environment for internet, technology and digital rights reporting by:

- **Bringing state-sanctioned digital rights violations to an end:** In general, digital rights and internet freedoms are under threat in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe⁶⁶, hence state authorities need to respect constitutional provisions on media freedom, which includes digital rights. Regional states need to decriminalise the media profession, condemn crimes against journalists to secure an environment conducive to free and unhindered professional journalism and citizens’ right to free expression both offline and online.
- **Collaborating with civil society and other stakeholders in crafting laws:** Calls have been made for regional⁶⁷ nations to err on the side of protecting their citizens’ rights to freedom of speech by not promulgating misinformation laws, instead, governments, in collaboration with civil society and citizens can come up with an all- inclusive approach to find ways of dealing with false news, without necessarily resorting to regulations. Laws should lean more on the side of entrenching fundamental human rights in line with the constitutional provisions and regional and international instruments that safeguard these freedoms such as the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms and Declaration on the Principles of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, among others⁶⁸.

64A concept defined by Gandy (1982). See, Kothari, A. (2018). NGOs and Health Reporting in Tanzania. *African Journalism Studies*, 39(2), 42–60. doi:10.1080/23743670.2018.1473267

65Nisbet, M. C., & Fahy, D. (2015). The Need for Knowledge-Based Journalism in Politicized Science Debates. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 658(1), 223–234. doi:10.1177/0002716214559887

66See Digital Rights Literacy in Southern Africa <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/06/Digital-rights-literacy-in-Southern-Africa-2020.pdf> [20 November 2020]

67See Covid-19, fake news laws being used to stifle free speech <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/06/Digital-rights-literacy-in-Southern-Africa-2020.pdf> [Accessed 20 November 2020]

68 *ibid*

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- **Fully implementing National ICT policies:** Although internet governance ⁶⁹policies and regulation in the region present a policy conundrum on what having access and the use of the internet means to each society, the respective national ICT plans exist to bolster universal access, economic and social growth, yet implementation on these policies is either lacking or ill funded for ultimately, Southern Africa governments have a duty to uphold digital rights and act in conformity to the letter and spirit of the African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms which stipulates that: Everyone has the right to use the Internet and digital technologies in relation to freedom of assembly and association, including through social networks and platforms.

Conclusion

Specialised journalism is costly hence stakeholders that desire to promote internet, technology and digital rights reporting need to find ways to subsidise, incentivise, collaborate, fund and resource media players. Several strategies for doing so have been outlined in this paper, informed by successful strategies deployed in promoting other forms of specialised journalism such as elections and health reporting as well as climate change and data journalism.

Private sector players, civil society organisations, foundations and donor-agencies can play a role in resourcing media players whether mainstream, online or peripheral actors.

In addition, Governments in the region need to allow the media to operate freely and desist from political interference, censorship and repression so that media can enjoy editorial independence. Moreover, compliance with and adherence to regional and international instruments and the respective Constitutions of Southern Africa countries own Constitution is crucial in protecting the digital rights of citizens.

⁶⁹See Digital Rights Literacy in Southern Africa <https://zimbabwe.misa.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2020/06/Digital-rights-literacy-in-Southern-Africa-2020.pdf> [Accessed 20 November 2020]

