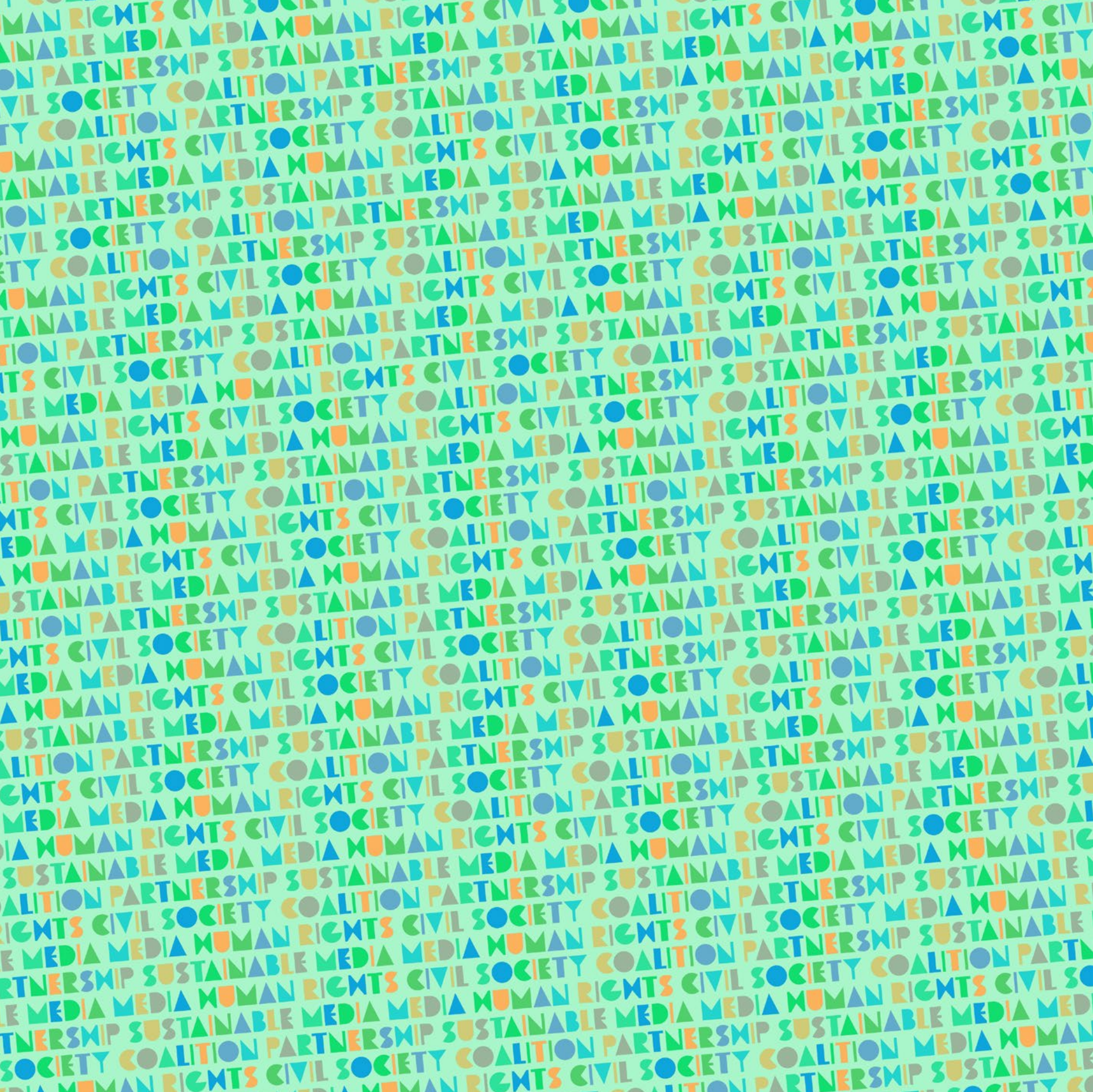




# PEOPLE POWER TRUTH

**Human Rights, Civil Society &  
the Media in sub-Saharan Africa**

**A Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms  
and Media Development (CHARM) Africa anthology**



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# MEDIA + CIVIL SOCIETY = SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM & HUMAN RIGHTS

Journalists alone cannot save journalism, and civil society activists and human rights defenders alone cannot defend civil space. This is why multi-stakeholder coalitions, as well as regional and international networks, constitute an essential pathway to identify and deliver solutions to the complex challenges confronting both media systems and civil society. Coalitions can provide opportunities for media and civil society to work in a more strategic and coordinated manner on relevant issues, and to build the political will needed to sustain progress.

A free and vibrant media and civil society are no doubt key agents of democracy. However, the media and rights-based civil society organisations' activities are often the first to be restricted when democracy is under attack. The ability of these organisations to withstand these restrictions and deliver on their respective mandates is therefore vital. This ability is compromised by a number of factors, such as the professionalism of the organisations; their sustainability and independence; the availability and diversity of their resources; their access to security; the reliability of their communication; their access to community narratives; the strength of their networks; the efficacy of their structure; the support they enjoy; and the capacity they have for collaboration and joint action.

As a response to these needs, the Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) Africa project was initiated in December 2019, funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). It brings together six regional partners, namely Fojo Media Institute, Wits Journalism, CIVICUS, Civil Rights Defenders, DefendDefenders and Hub Afrique.

With joint actions, the aim is to strengthen coalition building between civil society, media and human rights defenders in sub-Saharan Africa. The project facilitates collaborations between existing like-minded organisations, aspiring to meet the growing need for media, civil society and human rights organisations to think strategically and ally with research institutions, policy organisations, thinktanks and actors in the digital sphere who have the ability to contribute with new skills and experiences.

This anthology – *PEOPLE POWER TRUTH* – is an important part of this ongoing effort. It brings together the ideas of different thinkers in the media space, civil organisations and human rights activists. It is also a starting point for a CHARM think tank that will display good practices and ideas on coalition building.

It is our hope that these articles will serve to stimulate thought and debate and lead to discussions and deliberation between civil society activists, media practitioners, private sector and government representatives on how to engage in coalitions, jointly building democratic and sustainable structures for the well-being of our societies. ✎



When the CHARM consortium approached me to ask if I would be interested in taking on this project as Editor, my heart truly skipped a beat. Here was an opportunity to try and make the link between journalism, civil rights, social justice and human rights – all areas I have worked in, and know would have incredible power if they entered into transparent coalitions.



Anso Thom, Editor of People Power Truth.

Journalism, civil rights groups and human rights defenders are witnesses to and servants of society. Their intention is always to shine a light, to make visible and to improve the world for humanity. Sometimes they fail; sometimes, they are at the very heart and centre of stimulating change and improving the world.

In the new, more connected global world we face, with all its significant challenges, it is ever more important that these groups and the platforms they have function optimally, and in the service of bettering society.

It is the thinking of those at the forefront of these fields that we can be better. That we can improve – by working together, on the critical issues that face and impact the entire globe, and that will determine what type of world the next generation will inherit.

Thank you to all those who contributed to bringing this publication to light. Despite demanding schedules, Covid-19 complications, well-deserved festive season breaks and continued human rights challenges, our writers met their deadlines and helped enrich the content within these pages.

Each one of our contributors has come to the matter from a particular angle, making the overall offering an inspiring collection of ideas and proposals – ideas and proposals that we hope are only the start of the conversation.

The contributions take the reader from the birth of civil groups in a virgin democracy in Sierra Leone, to bringing our attention to the incredible positive contribution of women in Africa during conflict periods. They tell the stories of the work of amaBhungane, where advocacy and journalists show how they can live in symbiosis; of Magamba Network, who use arts and culture to fight a repressive regime in Zimbabwe; of DefendDefenders, who assist human rights activists in East Africa and the horn of Africa; and of the work of the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders, who champion safety, security and the well-being of human rights defenders in Kenya.

JamLab and CIVICUS tell the story of their efforts to strengthen civil society. We get insight into the hugely impressive work of the Spotlight publication in South Africa, which produces compelling, in-depth public-interest health journalism. And key contributors and experts in the field – such as Samwel Mohochi, Lars Tallert, Retha Langa, Anne Koch, Mark Lee Hunter and Anton Harber – share their thoughts, ideas and inspiring perspectives.

I am deeply grateful to Sofie Gulberg, Lars Tallert and the CHARM consortium for having the insight to start and to stimulate such a critical debate. This publication will achieve an important goal if it advances the discourse on this issue.

Our society will no doubt be better served by a strengthened coalition of impactful, creative, credible and vibrant media, civil society groups and human rights activists. When functioning optimally, these groups serve as an incredibly important cornerstone of democracies around the world and even more so on our beloved continent.

Anso Thom

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Editor: Anso Thom  
 Proofreading: Dave Buchanan  
 Photo sourcing: Joyrene Kramer  
 Art direction & design: Karien van der Westhuizen, the earth is round  
 Printing: Rob Print

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# IS IT FEASIBLE?

**The case for the coalition of media and civil society in the fight for civic space**

Joseph Kabiru argues that in many historic cases on the African continent, the media and civil society organisations have worked together – with impactful results. He writes that the partnership may be amorphous, but in the future it might define a well-organised and structured coalition, as the two parties are the central pillar of a country's civic space.

In May 2000, *The Economist* magazine splashed a damning headline across its pages, indicting the African continent as having failed – politically, economically, and socially. “Hopeless Africa,” screamed the headline of the 11 May edition. The article focused on Sierra Leone, which was engulfed in a dreadful, never-ending civil war.

“Indeed, since the difficulties of helping Sierra Leone seemed so intractable, and since Sierra Leone seemed to epitomise so much of the rest of Africa, it began to look as though the world might just give up on the entire continent,” noted the article.

The symbolism of Sierra Leone could not escape the attention of the average reader. Former slaves from the Americas birthed the country; and by the 19th century, the West African nation was touted as a beacon of hope.

In May 2002, Sierra Leone steadfastly began its journey towards becoming a democratic country. It held its second democratic elections after a peace settlement had been reached, ushering in a new dispensation. Indeed, in 2018 we witnessed a peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another.

*The Economist* article might have been harsh, to say the least; but what it missed was the 1990s renaissance that set the stage for the opening of the civic space, as evidenced by the multipartyism wave that swept across the continent.

The 1990s saw the media, citizens, women's groups, civil society organisations and opposition groups clamouring for change and urging governments to open up civic space and respect human rights, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, among a litany of other civil liberties.

Pressure from the international community also forced authoritarian leaders to abolish obstructionist government policies and start opening up the civic space.

Niger, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Cameroon, Benin, Togo and Mali are some of the sub-Saharan African countries that ushered in multipartyism, following pressure mounted by civil society organisations and the media, among others. And 11 February 1990 will remain a memorable day for Africa, as former South African leader Nelson Mandela was released from prison. One year later, the African National Congress won an electoral majority in the country's first free elections, and Mandela was elected South Africa's president. Activists, the media, and many other players helped in toppling South Africa's racist system of apartheid.

And in 2011, *The Economist* ran a cover story under the banner “Africa Rises,” which noted that the continent's economic exploits were on the upswing, with improved governance.



Joseph Kabiru is the Advocacy and Communications Officer, I4C (Innovation for Change) – Africa Hub.



*February 11, 1990 will always remain a memorable day for Africa, as former South African leader Nelson Mandela was released from prison.*

## The 1960s marked the end of colonialism for many African countries. Over the decades since, the media and civil society organisations have proved to be critical actors in ensuring that Africa's civic space is safeguarded.

### The long road

How had this come about? The 1960s marked the end of colonialism for many African countries. Over the decades since, the media and civil society organisations have proved to be critical actors in ensuring that Africa's civic space is safeguarded. They have played an essential part in connecting government institutions, policymakers and the general public, and have played the critical role of watchdog when accountability is needed.

These two key players – the media and CSOs – played a significant part in the push for reform. The latter provided a narrative, while the former delivered a channel for the narrative. And they continue to do so: for example, they ensure that necessary checks and balances are imposed on the government or powerful ruling elite; and they promote social and economic growth and democracy, promote freedom of speech, and protect and strengthen civic space and participation, among other goals.

It is no wonder that journalists and activists suffer the most in the fight to open up civic space in Africa. On the verge of holding its presidential elections, Uganda is an excellent example of this.

But there are many examples of the power of journalism and activism. In Kenya, for instance, the agitation of political pluralism began in earnest in the 1980s. In 1991 the late Daniel Toroitich Arap Moi capitulated and forced the repeal of Section 2A, paving the way for the first multiparty elections in 1992. This constitutional change also allowed the introduction of term limits for the Presidency.

How did this happen? Following the abortive 1982 coup, Moi had tightened his grip on government, and launched a massive crackdown on government critics and dissidents. He undermined the rule of law and respect for human rights in Kenya and completely stifled the civic space, eventually becoming a ruthless dictator.

But ad hoc social movements were cobbled together, made up of the opposition, the clergy, media intellectuals, CSOs, and academia. They applied pressure on the government to open up the civic space.

One such successful coalition was the Ufungamano Initiative, a powerful movement

involved in the push for constitutional reforms between 1999 and 2005. The media, activists and the clergy were at the forefront of this initiative. It ushered in a new era, which saw civic spaces opening up for democratic engagement in the constitutional reform process. Kenya's 2010 Constitution is now considered among the most progressive constitutions in the world in terms of guaranteeing basic human rights.

The media and CSOs played a critical role in the constitution-making process. But despite their massive success, such coalitions always have limitations; the Ufungamano Initiative saw most of its leading lights co-opted by the government.

In his 2012 thesis titled 'The power and limits of social movements in promoting political and constitutional change: the case of the Ufungamano Initiative in Kenya (1999-2005)', Jacob Mwathi Mati, a senior lecturer at Sol Plaatje University, aptly notes: "While holding so much power and promise, movements are limited in their ability to affect fundamental changes in society. Even after substantial gains in challenging the state, the Ufungamano Initiative was vulnerable and agreed to enter a coerced merger with the state-led process in 2001. The merger dissipated the Ufungamano Initiative's energy."

From this account, one can safely deduce that the media and CSOs only coalesce when their interests are threatened. Indeed, the media and CSOs view each other with suspicion; each accuses the other of pursuing different agendas, partly because of their business models.

While externally funded CSOs may advocate for the opening up of civic space, the media care about the bottom line. Secondly, the media always accuse CSOs of advancing a foreign agenda. The CSOs, on the other hand, blame the media for not clearly understanding their role in the CSO ecosystem.

It gets even more complex: the majority of the media houses are owned by the political class, further undermining the impact of such media houses in fighting for or safeguarding the civic space.

### What works

But despite these challenges, all hope is not lost. The advent of social media has seen the

emergence of people journalism, or citizen journalism. A good example is how social media played a part in the recent 'Arab Spring' uprisings: the fall of Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak were attributed mainly to Facebook and Twitter. Networks formed online were crucial in organising a core group of activists, specifically in Egypt.

However, traditional or legacy media still has some advantages over the new media; fact-checking remains the most significant.

The Innovation for Change (I4C) Africa Hub's vision is to protect, respect, strengthen, expand, and recover civil society space. The Hub's vision for success is to build a support and referrals system that is more demand-driven, from the field and the various organisations, individuals, and groups – whether they are community-based, networks, grassroots or technical organisations – who might require specific support or services.

The Africa Hub has begun a collaborative initiative of working closely with media across the continent. This strategic partnership encompasses a range of initiatives – such as facilitating media data festivals, which involve journalists training on how to harness data in their work and how to combat fake news during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2020, despite the pandemic's challenges, we encouraged journalists to participate in the thematic webinars we facilitated across the continent, and to participate as partners. We are also planning to facilitate interviews with leading human rights activists across the continent's five major regions. As we advance in our mandate, we are in the process of identifying areas of more resonant and meaningful collaboration.

The partnership may be amorphous; however, we feel that in the future these nascent steps may help to define a well-organised and structured coalition.

In conclusion, there is still an opportunity for the media and CSOs to coalesce and pursue common interests. It should not escape us that the two together are a central pillar of a country's civic space. They still research, advocate in the public interest, and speak out regarding civic threats. ❏



The Economist cover, 13 May 2000.

# SEEING AFRICAN WOMEN IN MEDIA

Dr Yemisi Akinbobola argues that African women continuously demonstrate an impact and contribution towards peace and development on the continent. They are also invisible; and narratives about conflict in Africa are skewed towards a perspective that Africa and its people lack the agency to successfully silence the guns. She works to highlight these stories and make them visible.

*She Stands for Peace: 20 Years, 20 Journeys* was a book that emerged from a collaboration between the African Union Commission and the United Nations Office to the African Union. It aimed to commemorate UNSCR 1325 by documenting the stories of 20 African women, and women organisations, who through their own efforts have contributed to the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Africa. I was the Editorial Consultant, and worked with the women to tell their stories.

Their stories demonstrated to me the varying levels of impact and contribution African women continuously make towards peace and development on the continent. They also demonstrated how little we know of these stories, and the extent to which narratives about conflict in Africa are skewed towards a perspective that Africa and its people lack the agency to successfully silence the guns.

The stories of these heroines demonstrated varying levels of individual, community and collective strength, resilience and determination towards transformative change in their communities, in a way that both international and local media are yet to capture fully. And therefore, these women – the 20 featured in the book, and so many others – remain largely invisible in stories around peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Africa.

My first task as editorial consultant on *She Stands for Peace: 20 Years, 20 Journeys* was to find the women who had been nominated to be featured – and it was hard. They were not visible on all the usual platforms with which you would expect a researcher to start their research: Google, news websites and social media.

I recall the story of a woman in Libya, who had been so instrumental in claiming peace in her community through her bravery. Inspired by her story, I dug deep into my network, reaching out to local journalists, fixers and networks in the region, people with extensive sources and networks; and in the end, despite all our efforts, we were never able to find this woman so that she could tell her story. She therefore never made it into the book. Just consider for a moment how many such stories are dropped from publications and documentation because of this lack of visibility?

It is this kind of invisibility that my non-governmental organisation, African Women in Media (AWiM), sought to address with its aptly named Visibility Project: a project developed in partnership with Wikimedia Nigeria Foundation. The objectives of the Visibility Project are simple: to increase the number of African women visible on Wikipedia, and the number of African women who are Wikimedia editors.

Prior to the launch of the Visibility Project in July 2019, the statistics for women representation on Wikipedia were not good – just 17% of Wikipedia profiles were those of women. In Nigeria, for example, only 2 000 Wikipedia profiles existed for Nigerian women. Across the three Wikimedia



Dr Yemisi Akinbobola is the co-founder of African Women in Media, and a senior lecturer at Birmingham City University. She holds a PhD in Media and Cultural Studies, and has a research interest in Gender, Media and African Feminism(s). She is an award-winning journalist with experience in communications management roles for charities.



**The fact is, women journalists are playing a role. We just need to be better at capturing their lived experiences, and the extent to which the environment is enabling for them or otherwise.**

trainings and editathons that we did in 2020 under the Visibility Project, 300 women journalists were trained as Wikipedia editors, and 598 new profiles of African women were created.

The next time someone does a Google search about African women during Covid-19, African women in media, or African women and labour migration in Africa – among other topics we covered in the editathons – some of these women will surely come up!

The politics of visibility of women is important in the media discourse of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) – both in terms of the representational voices of women survivors of conflict and for ensuring their perspectives are visible, but also in considering the role women in media can play in ensuring this visibility. However, in order for us to consider the role women in media might play in the WPS agenda, we must also consider how both the media and the state treat them. It is not just a question of whether women journalists should be playing a more active role in the WPS agenda, considering the central role women play in peacebuilding as recognised by UNSCR 1325.

The fact is, women journalists are playing a role. We just need to be better at capturing their lived experiences, and the extent to which the environment is enabling for them or otherwise.

At the annual African Women in Media conference on 7 December 2020, multi-award-winning Sudanese journalist Amal Habbani pointed out that many women journalists covering peace and security in Sudan do so anonymously, and on poor pay – some earning as little as \$20 a month. These women journalists also do not use their bylines, for fear of retribution – something that Amal is well aware of, having been detained by Sudanese authorities 15 times herself.

The African Union's Agenda 2063 Aspiration 4 aspires to a "peaceful and secure Africa". Recognising the central role women play in conflict prevention and mediation efforts in Africa, the AU established FemWise-Africa (Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation). Similarly, there is a commitment to change the narrative of Africa and build the Africa we want.

So when we speak of media in relation to peace and development, and ask if Africa is on the right track, I question the extent to which the narratives

constructed in media – both on the continent and internationally – are truly making the invisible visible, as opposed to the repeated use of the same narratives and the same voices. When we speak of the role African women journalists should play in this, I question the extent to which gender biases and stereotyping in the workplace disempower women journalists from simply being able to do their jobs in the first place.

Recent research (2020) by AWiM and Fojo Media Institute, which surveyed 125 journalists across 17 African countries, found that the allocation of roles and resources in newsrooms is often gendered, thus impacting on the ability of African women journalists to report on topics such as politics. Additionally, I question the extent to which partisanship and ethnic divides in media ownership in some countries – and their impositions on press freedom – disempower journalists from being fully able to be active mediators of peace and development; the danger here being that when we are not objective or unbiased in our reporting, we unwittingly interfere with conflict resolution processes.

It is important that the media is able to successfully document, monitor and report on continental and national mechanisms put in place to promote peace, security, and development on the continent. And creating enabling environments for press freedom and for women journalists constitutes a reliable tool for monitoring how well African countries comply with the treaties they sign up to, and for monitoring their progress in achieving Aspiration 4, and also serves as a means to obtaining data that will support journalists in performing their functions. In this, therefore, the safety of journalists is paramount.

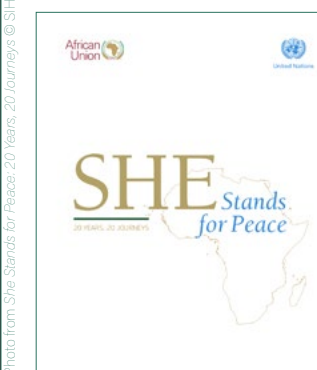
Lastly, I'd like to come back to the visibility of African women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Their stories matter – not just because they deserve the visibility, but because understanding the lived experiences of female victims and survivors of conflict can guide the expansion of campaigns geared towards the creation of enabling environments where gender-based violence can be prevented.


AWiM launched its niche news publication AWiMNews in 2020. AWiMNews produces news and analysis on 'African women and media'; thus, it promotes African women's voices and issues, and aims to increase media discourse on the issues of African women. **✦**



*Two young Sudanese women breaking gender stereotypes as small appliances mechanics in Khartoum, Sudan.*

Photo from She Stands for Peace: 20 Years, 20 Journeys © SIHA Network





# SHOULD JOURNALISTS DO ADVOCACY?

Is there a role for advocacy work in support of journalism?

Should journalists do advocacy? Murray Hunter argues that it is of critical importance they do, and that it is possible to have journalism and advocacy working alongside each other – and that it strengthens the end-product, as it does in the case of the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism.

There is no doubt that an investigative media outfit with an advocacy programme may raise eyebrows. But amaBhungane has scored major wins for transparency and free speech.

In early March 2020, halfway through a two-month 'caretaker' stint as the advocacy coordinator for the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism, I received a wonderful document in an email from our lawyers. It was a two-page court order – the details of which I'll come to, because they tell an important story about amaBhungane's advocacy work.

AmaBhungane is known for its long-form investigations of money, politics, and abuse of power in South Africa. This dogged approach – taking weeks, months or even years to chase down a story – has resulted in major exposés over the years, and more than a few awards. In 2019 for example, the group was part of a consortium of news organisations that received the Global Shining Light Award for the #GuptaLeaks investigation into the sprawling network of corruption surrounding South Africa's former president.

What many people don't realise is that the organisation also hosts an advocacy programme, which adopts the same tenacious approach to slowly push for reforms in policy and law in order to improve the climate for journalism itself. Through its unique approach to advocacy, a staff member – part researcher, part policy wonk, part campaigner – works (mostly on a parallel track to amaBhungane's investigators) to secure the information rights that are the lifeblood of investigative journalism.

In South Africa, access to information and freedom of expression are to a large extent protected in law; but bureaucrats, politicians, and private firms often flout the rules all the same.

Over the years, amaBhungane's programme has blossomed into an impressive portfolio of work, including submissions on legislative amendments (four last year), access-to-information requests (13 in 2019) and share-register inquiries (more than 40 last year), as well as strategic litigation on media-freedom issues (four active cases at the moment). You can access our advocacy work and our legal documents via our Virtual Library.

It is also important to understand what the programme isn't: amaBhungane does not do 'advocacy journalism', or advocacy about its journalism. Many who read amaBhungane's investigations into the corruption of former president Jacob Zuma organised protest marches calling for his resignation – but amaBhungane did not join them.



Murray Hunter is a media consultant and digital rights advocate; he was previously a coordinator of the Right2Know Campaign in South Africa, and the author of a children's book about digital surveillance. Hunter writes here for the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism, where he was acting advocacy coordinator in February and March 2020.



Revelations of corruption sparked national protests for the removal of Jacob Zuma in 2017 when he was president of South Africa. Thousands gathered in Cape Town on April 07, 2017 demanding his resignation.



### The slow road to transparency

Much of the programme's work is as unglamorous as the creature for which amaBhungane is named – *ibhungane*, the dung beetle.

Like many of their global counterparts, amaBhungane's journalists use freedom of information requests as part of their investigative toolkit. But in a climate where close to two-thirds of information requests are refused or simply ignored, many requests drag on long after any story has been filed.

Someone has to follow that process, to work the phones, to ensure recalcitrant officials eventually file a response; and should the response not be positive, someone must draft the appeal. By having a designated advocacy coordinator who is not tied to conventional newsroom duties, amaBhungane is able to pursue information requests not only in service to a story, but in pursuit of the principle of transparency itself.

This brings me back to the court order that landed in my inbox in March. Since 2015, amaBhungane has been trying to get details about coal-mining rights nationally. It started with an information request, which was refused. AmaBhungane filed an administrative appeal, which succeeded; but the documents never arrived.

In 2017 a court ordered that amaBhungane should get the documents. Still they didn't come. Finally, in late 2019, a judge ruled that the officials responsible were in contempt of court. At long last, in March, our lawyers received a copy of that contempt order, which directed those two officials to hand over the documents or pay R100 000 in fines. Personally.

The outbreak of Covid-19 may have bought those officials just a bit more time; and perhaps if those documents eventually arrive, they won't ever make it into a story. But the next journalist who calls up the mining department asking for information may find a much more thoughtful official on the other end of the phone. It took five years to happen, but like I said: long-form.

### Policy fights big and small

Some of amaBhungane's advocacy work is the stuff of major, history-making, precedent. Its current Constitutional Court challenge to South Africa's surveillance law, for example, seeks to

overturn years of abuse and secrecy in the state's spying machinery, after the revelation that state spies had bugged the phone of Sam Sole, one of our managing partners.

If the organisation can uphold the landmark victory it won in the lower courts, it will result in major privacy reforms to protect investigative reporters and the public at large.

But most of amaBhungane's advocacy work takes place out of sight, and without fanfare – workish submissions to policy processes in Parliament, asking for a secrecy clause to be struck from an energy bill, say, or proposing better transparency provisions in party-funding regulation.

All this is done without compromising its journalism. The advocacy work and the investigative work run parallel to each other, though there is not the hard 'firewall' that one hears about at the news and opinions operations at *The New York Times*, for example. We talk and keep one another updated.

In the very early days of amaBhungane, the advocacy work was a part-time role; our first advocacy coordinator split her time between advocacy and reporting. It was an unhappy arrangement which worked to the detriment of both.

By having a dedicated advocacy coordinator, the organisation can ring-fence both the work (so that amaBhungane's journalists do not have to involve themselves in lobbying and campaigning) and the workload (so that the journalists can get on with, well... journalism).

But the organisation and its journalists are especially sensitive to the risk of being seen as partisan – even more so after the emergence of coordinated disinformation and smear campaigns against amaBhungane and other media organisations, which started in the lead-up to the #GuptaLeaks reports and never really went away.

It's ironic that amaBhungane, with its declared advocacy programme, could be seen as partisan and campaigning, when many of South Africa's commercial newsrooms appear to have been drawn into messy factional wars that have led to an industry-wide ethics inquiry.

I've worked alongside amaBhungane's advocacy programme for nearly a decade as an information-rights activist, and have seen the organisation prove its integrity over and over again.

Now more than ever, journalism must be able to fight for itself. And amaBhungane's unique advocacy model allows the group to do just that.

**Traditional investigative journalism has sought to keep advocacy out of the newsroom. But this is a time in which doing journalism is not enough to secure journalism's future.**

If anything, my sense is that the organisation's reluctance to be seen as 'crusading' creates a silence about its advocacy work, in which Twitter trolls are more than happy to craft their own narratives.

### **Covid-19 clampdowns**

The global crises sparked by Covid-19 suggest that advocacy for journalism is more important than ever. For starters, the pandemic has brought new obstacles to the flow of information.

For example, despite strong legal protections for the principle of open justice, the pandemic has led to serious transparency challenges in South Africa's court systems. Access to court records was unreliable even before Covid-19 restriction; now, it is even more so.

As court hearings have moved to video call platforms, Chereese Thakur (who succeeded me as amaBhungane's advocacy coordinator) has been haunting the phones and inboxes of court officials to try and get the schedules of court hearings published online ahead of time, as a basic condition for ensuring court processes remain open.

Out in the streets, in the chaotic weeks following South Africa's 'lockdown', journalists documented appalling brutality by police and soldiers sent out to enforce it; and in several instances were harassed, stopped from filming, and even fired at with rubber bullets.

Don't miss amaBhungane's advocacy updates. Sign up to receive our free newsletter at [amabhungane.org](http://amabhungane.org).

But surely the greatest crisis for journalism in this moment is economic; and media advocacy to address the economic devastation being felt in newsrooms is needed urgently. Though many have risen to meet the reporting challenge of our time, many may not survive it.

Even before the pandemic, it already seemed unlikely that mainstream journalistic outlets would 'innovate' their way out of the harsh financial climate without major regulatory interventions: to provide public grants to media organisations, give tax credits to companies that buy ads or levy taxes off the tech giants, or any manner of other policy response.

AmaBhungane's advocacy work has yet to venture into this space – although SANEF, the South

African National Editors' Forum, has initiated research into the policy questions in recent years.

If ever there was a role for advocacy work in support of journalism, this is it.

Traditional investigative journalism has sought to keep advocacy out of the newsroom. But this is a time in which doing journalism is not enough to secure journalism's future. Now more than ever, journalism must be able to fight for itself. And amaBhungane's unique advocacy model allows the group to do just that.

### **LATE-BREAKING**

*On Thursday, 4 February 2021, the Constitutional Court handed down a decision in South Africa which has already received worldwide acclaim. It found in favour of amaBhungane in a landmark case involving the collision between the right to privacy and the right of the state to engage in surveillance.*

*The court ruled that the Regulation of Interception of Communications and Provision of Communication-Related Information Act (Rica) is unconstitutional because it did not provide sufficient safeguards to protect the privacy of citizens. It also confirmed that bulk surveillance is unlawful in South Africa.*

*Edward Snowden responded to the high court judgment in this case in a tweet, simply saying "Wow".*

*We should all have the same reaction to the decision of the Constitutional Court. At last, the country's surveillance laws will have to take privacy rights seriously. ✎*

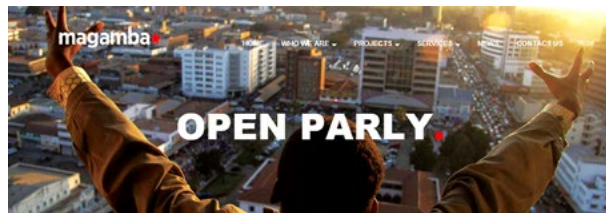


# **CREATIVITY IN THE FACE OF CLAMPDOWNS**

**In Zimbabwe, you have no option but to be creative. When you're faced with a repressive regime, an ever-imploding economy and a ruling party that thinks it owns the country, you don't exactly have loads of options, writes Samm Farai Monro from Magamba Network.**



Photo: LUSO/PA/OPA/PF via Getty Images



Zimbabwean anti-riot police look at a supporter of the opposition party Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) taking part in a protest against alleged widespread fraud by the election authority and ruling party.



In Zimbabwe, you have no option but to be creative. When you're faced with a repressive regime, an ever-imploding economy and a ruling party that thinks it owns the country, you don't exactly have loads of options.

Plus, the ruling party – Zanu PF – controls the only TV channel in the country, and most radio stations. And is now intent on taking over independent newspapers too. So creativity in the face of all this seems like a no-brainer. A different way of doing things is the only real option.

And so Magamba Network was born, our network that works on the cutting edge of arts, digital media, activism and innovation. Magamba Network was born at a poetry slam.

Its co-founder, Tongai Makawa (AKA Outspoken) had seen my dreadlocked, cocky self on TV talking about how I was the dopest poet around; and he decided to come and battle me at the House of Hunger Poetry Slam – a slam that a few other poets and I had launched as a space for rebellious free expression in the pre-social media age.

And so we battled. With words. With a dozen other ferocious young poets. Through the first round. And the second round. Until it was just me and him in the final. And we tied – according to the dubious judges.

So we had to split the prize, which was a quarter chicken and chips and a book. I was hungry, so I took the chicken and chips. Outspoken was hungry for knowledge, so he took the book. And that's when we realised we could work together – and the idea of Magamba Network was born.

### Early days

2007. The year before 2008. Which as everyone knows, was the year Zimbabwe entered the record books for having the highest-ever inflation rate. (Take that, Weimar Republic.) It got to the point that it would cost you a trillion dollars to buy a beer. Wallets were no longer of any use, as you had to walk around with a backpack to hold all your wads of useless Zim Dollar notes.

So yeah, 2007 was the pleasant environment in which we decided to launch Magamba. At the time Robert Mugabe had been the only President I had known my whole life (and I was 28), the country was still reeling from World Bank neoliberal reforms in the '90s, and Zanu PF had rigged and beaten their way to remaining in power.

Me and Outspoken saw how much disillusionment there was among young people. How there were so many NGOs, but so few that spoke to young people in a language that they understood, and that could inspire them to take action.

magamba★



Samm Farai Monro AKA Comrade Fatso is Zimbabwe's trailblazing political satirist, a leading activist for freedom of expression and a media disruptor. Comrade Fatso is founder of Magamba Network, one of Zimbabwe's most dynamic organizations working on the cutting edge of culture, media, activism and innovation. As a satirist he is the co-creator of the internationally acclaimed Zambesi News satire show and the weekly political news show The Week. Comrade Fatso's satirical work has been highlighted and featured on CNN, BBC, Channel 4 (UK) and The Guardian to name a few. Through his groundbreaking comedy and activism Comrade Fatso has reached millions across Zimbabwe and beyond.

## So the idea behind Magamba Network was to use creative forms of youth activism to open up democratic space. We wanted to go to where young people were at.

So the idea behind Magamba was to use creative forms of youth activism to open up democratic space. We wanted to go to where young people were at. We started off organising hip-hop and spoken-word events that gathered hundreds of young people and pushed the boundaries of free expression, at a time where Facebook really wasn't a thing.

We then began to embrace other forms of popular, urban youth culture that could connect with young people and inspire them to be part of a change in their country. We literally made it up as we went along. So we began to branch out into blogging, satire, festivals and innovation hubs.

We started out running Magamba part-time from the lounge of our Avenues flat, and grew it to become Zimbabwe's leading creative and digital media organization, which reaches millions of young Zimbabweans annually.

We now run two major programmes and seven projects. These include an urban culture festival, a political satire TV production studio, a creative hub, digital media projects, a nationwide socially conscious music competition, and a film fellowship that incubates a new generation of film-makers committed to social justice.

Over the years we've seen how our work has helped to expand space for free expression online, inspire a new generation of political satirists, support the emergence of critical new voices, and use digital media to drive campaigns that force progressive policy changes.

### Making Parliament accessible

Our Open Parly ZW initiative is a good example of our digital innovation work. We realised that young people felt disconnected and cut off from the corridors of power where decisions are made that affect them. So we trained young citizen journalists to go and tweet live from Parliament, to break down all the bullshit into language that young people understand.

And it's really blown up! The platform creates dynamic interaction between young people and decision-makers. An MP may fall asleep in Parliament – so our Open Parly handle tweets that such and such an MP has fallen asleep for the fourth time this Parliamentary session. Twitter goes wild, with young people saying, "How dare he fall

asleep. I voted for him!" The MP himself becomes aware of the furor, and jumps onto Twitter and tweets at Open Parly, saying, "I wasn't sleeping. I was just resting my eyes!" And there you have it – accountability, in just 280 characters.

Open Parly has become the go-to handle for young people seeking independent political information. It is a radical transparency project that has become one of the Zimbabwean media handles with the highest engagement rates on social media – eclipsing most legacy media companies. We cover more parliamentary sessions than the national broadcaster and the Parliamentary *Hansard* combined. Open Parly reaches over ten million impressions per month on Twitter. And all this with just a few committed comrades with fast Twitter fingers.

We have now expanded this exciting media experiment on the continent, having launched Open Parly in Somalia as Kalfadhi.com, and more recently setting up Open Parly ZED in Zambia. Open Parly ZED has already seen some great success, having inspired the Parliament of Zambia to copy its ideas – it now livestreams Parliamentary sessions on its newly created Facebook page.

Open Parly is also a powerful vehicle for online campaigning, given that it has over 170 000 young followers on Twitter. In 2017, as Zimbabwe geared up for the elections the following year, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) chairwoman Rita Makarau made a controversial statement, that women should get their husbands to sign proof-of-residence affidavits to enable them to register to vote. Makarau also announced planned regulations to make registration more cumbersome for young urban voters who have no fixed address. This seemed like blatant voter suppression of young urban voters and young women voters by the Zanu PF-controlled commission.

So we kicked off our #DearRita campaign on Twitter, and encouraged young people to share their concerns about how these new proposed regulations would affect their plans to vote. The campaign mobilised thousands of young people online, it became one of the most trending hashtags in the country; and within 24 hours, ZEC was forced to publicly distance itself from Makarau's statement, and assured the public that it would not put in place such retrogressive regulations. ZEC also re-activated its Twitter handle, to deal with the backlash and to respond to real-time requests.

The account remained active and engaged, giving people improved access to voter information online, ahead of the 2018 elections.

Meanwhile the planned voter registration requirements were relaxed, thus enabling more young men and women to register to vote. Five point two million people registered to vote in the 2018 elections. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission estimated that 60% of the people who registered to vote were between the ages of 18 and 40 years old. The 2018 elections saw historic youth turnout. So yeah, sometimes hashtags can work.

### Not the nine o'clock news

We don't just do hard news and campaigns. We also do political satire. It all started by fluke, really. A good friend of mine who was working for a film festival approached me and Outspoken in 2010, and asked us to read some comedy news at the closing night of their festival. I guess it's because every time we were on stage performing, we would talk so much shit that we passed as comedians! We told her that unfortunately, we were about to go on tour in Denmark with my band, so we couldn't do it. She was like, "Guys, it's a film festival. We can send a camera crew to pre-record your news show."

So the day of the shoot came, and 30 minutes before the camera crew arrived I was like, "Dude, we haven't written anything." We quickly wrote up a script, titled it Zambezi News, and shot it. We got back a month later from our tour, and were told that it had been a hit at the film festival – we were on to something. So we shot a pilot season of *Zambezi News*, which is a parody of the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation, our state TV channel that just issues relentless propaganda. We produced it before social media was big in Zimbabwe, and so we printed 10 000 DVDs that we distributed across the country to over 100 towns, villages and growth points.

We got overwhelmingly positive feedback; but our favourite piece of audience comment must have been the one from a viewer who wrote, "I can't believe this is the state of our national broadcaster. I can't believe ZBC has sunk to these levels!" I turned to our *Zambezi News* team and said "Guys, we've made it! We've achieved our dream! They think we're ZBC. We can quit now, after the first season!" *Zambezi News* is now five seasons in, has been broadcast on DStv to over two million households

in Southern Africa, and has been featured on CNN, BBC and in *The Guardian*. It's managed to inspire a new generation of young satirists – and get us into a fair bit of trouble, too.

In 2016 – as Zimbabweans' viewing habits changed – we launched a new political satire show called *The Week*, exclusively for YouTube and Facebook. It's a weekly political round-up of the news, and reaches an estimated 400 000 young viewers per season. It encourages young people to get involved in civic campaigns, and forces government ministers to respond. We've found that humour is a great way to package information for young people, so they can reflect on the news and take action.

When Covid-19 and lockdowns hit in early 2020, we realised we would have to pivot a lot of our Magamba programming. So we switched to fully virtual and digital programming. We set up CovidZW, info as Zimbabwe's first nationwide Covid cases tracker. We then organised a nationwide virtual hackathon to hack together plug ins for the website. We had 16 teams of techies participating virtually from across the country to build innovative access to information solutions.

We also started observing how Covid funds corruption was becoming a new battleground. So we worked with the Follow The Money movement and the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development to launch FollowCovidMoney.com, to track how African governments were spending Covid funds and to use virtual means to push for accountability.

Magamba turns 14 years old this year. We've had so much thrown at us over the years: from repression to Covid-19, from internet shutdowns to police raids on our offices. Bring it on! We're ready to meet whatever that new challenge will be – with some innovative thinking, fast Twitter fingers, and a dash of humour. ✎



# THE WAR AGAINST MISINFORMATION DEMANDS A GROUP EFFORT

An interview with Retha Langa, Deputy Director of Africa Check.

## Retha, can you share with us the philosophy behind starting Africa Check? What was the purpose, the idea behind it?

Africa Check started in 2012, and actually has its origins in health misinformation. Our launch was inspired by a classic example in Nigeria in the early 2000s: a widely shared and widely believed rumour that the polio vaccine was being used to reduce Nigeria's population.

Our founder, Peter Cunliffe-Jones, was living in Nigeria then, as bureau chief of the AFP news agency. Over the next few years, he followed reports of how false claims about polio vaccines had led to a surge in the number of polio cases in Nigeria and surrounding countries, and that is where the idea to start Africa Check was born – to do fact-checking, and say, "Look, we need to do more when these rumours start circulating;" to actually debunk them, to proactively get accurate information out there.

Because the implications and impact of misinformation are very real – you know, when one says it's a 'life or death' issue, it sounds like you might be exaggerating; but it really is that. Recent events show how misinformation can impact people's behaviour. It impacts what they do, whether they wear a mask, decide to get vaccinated, wash their hands, and adhere to other preventative measures.

## In the current Covid scenario, misinformation seems to be rife; and it seems that much of it stems from social media. Do you agree, and how does Africa Check tackle the matter?

Yes, there is [a lot], but there is also a massive increase and awareness of the dangers of misinformation. Over the last year we have seen an increase in interest in the work we do. Misinformation is circulating in huge amounts, and in different ways. Social media is a key channel; but we must not forget that there is also a huge amount circulating in offline spaces. Many people are dependent on radio for information – they are not on WhatsApp, they are not on social media.

So we are continuously looking at ways to get a better, more in-depth understanding of what is circulating in offline spaces. And that is where partnerships become key, and it's something that we're going to place a lot of focus on this year. Working with civil society organisations that have a strong presence within communities is so critical. They are key to understanding what claims are circulating, and what is driving them.

## The problem seems to be big and impactful. Hence a big response is needed. How do you plan your response? Where do you even begin?

Africa Check believes in a 360-degree approach. You cannot just do one thing, and think that it's the magic bullet that fixes the misinformation problem. It's too complex. It's too big for fact-checkers to solve by themselves, and certainly too big for Africa Check to solve. There is no way we could fact-check every false claim out there.

So partnerships are really, really key. We work with journalists; we work with a network of fact-checkers across the continent called the Africa Facts Network. We share knowledge, we share skills, we collaborate on projects, we have regular online meetings (on Slack, for example) where we share lessons, share experiences.

During the course of 2019, the network focused on issues such as Covid; but also, other things that fact-checkers battle with: how do I secure sustainability? How do I measure impact? All these issues are key to running a sustainable fact-checking organisation.

## So, to fight misinformation, it requires collaboration between many stakeholders. What about the public itself, the users of social media?

One area that we also focused on last year was media literacy. We have always prioritised engagement with our audience, with our supporters. We invite them to send us claims to fact-check, for example. And it's an important relationship for us, because as I say, we cannot fact-check everything. We have got to work harder to empower people, so that – when they get that WhatsApp, when they see something on Facebook

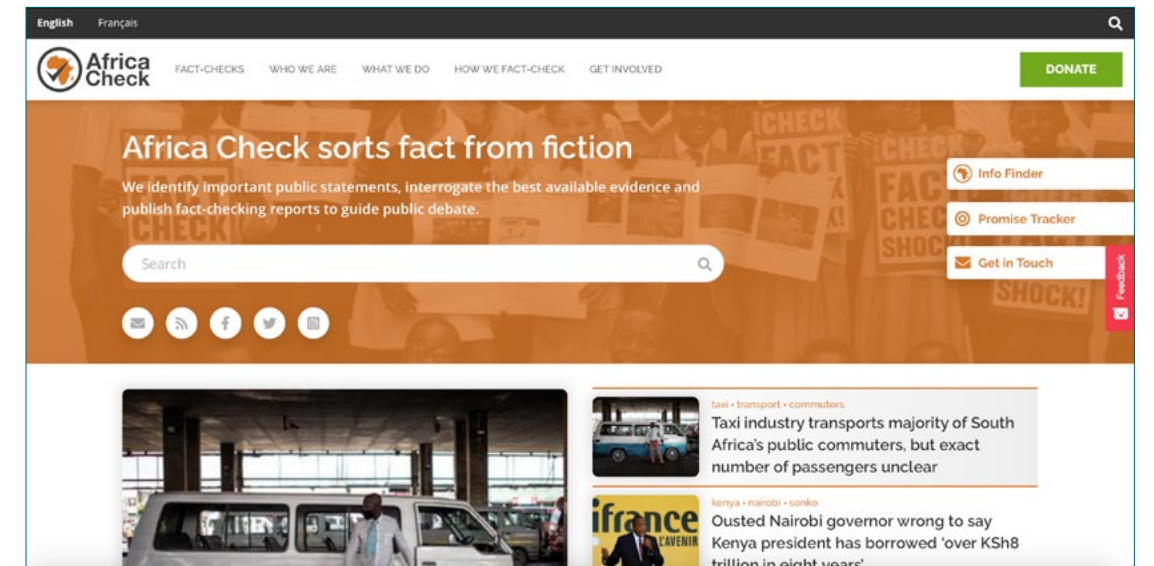


Retha Langa joined Africa Check as deputy director in August 2019. She has over a decade of experience across various sectors, including media, development and entrepreneurship. Retha is driven by a desire to do meaningful work that matters. She started her career as a journalist and later moved into the non-profit space, working in rural health. She holds a PhD in heritage from Wits University.





Rumours that the polio vaccine was being used to reduce Nigeria's population led to a resistance to taking the vaccine and a subsequent increase in polio cases. Africa Check came into being to counter the misinformation.



**Africa Check** Five steps to fight fake news and false information on WhatsApp

- 1. Who wrote it?**  
If you're not sure who wrote the message or where its claims come from – be careful.  
Before you share: Ask the sender who the author and source is, and then double-check the facts.
- 2. Can I verify the claims?**  
If you aren't sure a claim is backed up by a trustworthy source, be careful.  
Before you share: Ask the sender if the same claim has been reported on any trusted news sites or other sources, and make sure these aren't hoax sites.
- 3. Does the information make me scared or angry?**  
Many fake messages try to make us scared or angry about something.  
Before you share: Ask yourself if the message is playing on people's fears or prejudices? If so, double-check the facts.
- 4. Does it include shocking pictures, video or audio?**  
Fake messages often make use of manipulated pictures, video or audio.  
Before you share: Check if the media might have been edited or comes from a past event or location.
- 5. Am I sure this is not a hoax?**  
Many fake messages can be verified by consulting reliable news sites or fact-checking websites.  
Before you share: Search online to see if the message has already been fact-checked or reported as a hoax.

[africacheck.org](http://africacheck.org)

**We have got to work harder to empower people, so that – when they get that WhatsApp, when they see something on Facebook – they pause; they think, they say: “Hang on a minute. Let me do a bit of digging, let me do a bit of research before I just forward this.”**

– they pause; they think, they say: “Hang on a minute. Let me do a bit of digging, let me do a bit of research before I just forward this.”

And we know that often, people really do not have bad intentions. Of course you have disinformation; but if I think about family members, you are sharing something because you care, because you are worried; it is not because you have malicious intentions, it is often driven by real concern for those you love.

So we’ve done quite a bit of work on media literacy, and it’s something that we will continue doing. Last year, we launched a media literacy campaign called #KeepTheFactsGoing. We created voicenote episodes for WhatsApp in local languages. Those were also broadcast on community radio stations. In South Africa, we worked in isiZulu; In Kenya: Swahili; Senegal: Wolof; Nigeria: Pidgin and Hausa. We wanted to empower people to pause and think before they share. We focused on a wide range of topics around health and Covid, and we received very positive feedback from our subscribers. The fact that we produced these in different languages was also very important, to reach a wider audience.

So for us, that kind of work is really key – to work with media, to work with civil society, to build partnerships and to do more to empower people to be able to critically evaluate the flood of information they receive on a daily basis.

**It seems that in order for you to do this important work, you cross over a bit. You’re a media organisation, but you’re also a bit of a civil society organisation; is that accurate? How do you balance the issues, so that people still trust the organisation? How transparent are you about what drives your work?**

What you said is very key for us – transparency; because based on the very nature of our work, we have got to consistently make sure that we build trust. That is key: that people know, if I am looking for accurate information, I can trust Africa Check. And that’s not something we are complacent about; it’s something we take very seriously, and it’s something we work at continuously. We owe it to people to continuously take that very seriously. We are very transparent about the kind of work we do;

we are transparent about who funds us, about who we partner with, and why we do what we do.

If we get something wrong, we correct it and we are transparent about it. We expect the same from others, so it’s only right that we are open about it as well.

**Can you speak about the value of being a bit of both – journalists and civil society activists?**

It is valuable that we can bring that perspective. We understand journalism, and the industry, and the challenges the media sector faces. But we also understand the incredible ability and power of civil society to create awareness, to drive change. In both instances, accurate information is the cornerstone that everything rests on. Whatever position you advocate for, it needs to be based on accurate information.

We are trying to create awareness of the importance of accurate information; but it’s equally important for us to better understand different communities. And that is where civil society can really bring a lot to the table, in terms of understanding why certain pieces of misinformation spread so easily, and what drives that, versus others that might not really get traction. So for us it is not just about *we are creating awareness about the importance of accurate information*; there is immense value in terms of the knowledge and the insight that civil society can bring, to help us work together to better tackle misinformation.

**Would you argue that more media and civil society organisations should work in this way – to partner transparently in order to be more effective?**

Yes, we’ve got to be quite innovative. The kind of pressure that the media is under was just accelerated by the Covid pandemic, and calls for new approaches. We are doing a project in Nigeria especially focused on health misinformation, where we are bringing together journalists and a lot of different important role players in health – from the Bureau of Statistics, to doctors, to the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control, to researchers. We started a WhatsApp group where people can flag misinformation, and then we can all work together to respond to it.

And we’ve had a lot of success with that – these journalists now have direct lines to experts. They don’t have to wait for a press release; you can quickly flag misinformation, you can respond to it much quicker. For example, we had a scenario around rumours about yellow fever in 2019, and it could quickly be flagged; the Centre for Disease Control was made aware of the misinformation and could respond quickly, and we could get accurate information out there.

The pandemic has shown the need for these kinds of collaborative approaches, where you work together to solve the problem of misinformation.

**So in sub-Saharan Africa, how hard is it to access good information – for instance, from governments, bodies, entities – to be able to fact-check whatever information is out there?**

It’s not easy work. In the beginning, our questions to spokespeople and others often went unanswered. But as we became more active, built more partnerships, more awareness of our work, it became easier. You need to build a credible track record, and create awareness of your work. You have to work to get buy-in. It doesn’t happen overnight. You’ve got to do the work to build the relationships for people to realise that you are an organisation that is built on trust, that you are non-partisan, that you do not have a particular agenda in terms of the work you do.

**In terms of you working with civil society: within sub-Saharan Africa, do you find that it’s easier in some countries, as opposed to others, to build those coalitions with civil society?**

We have always been quite clear that it’s not a ‘one size fits all’ approach; we work in four countries (South Africa, Kenya, Senegal and Nigeria), and there are nuances to each country. For us, what is very important is that we have local teams in each country; so we’re not trying to build a partnership from South Africa in Nigeria. Our Nigeria team understands the context, and understands how we have to go about things to be impactful in our approach.

**What is your reading of the lie of the land in terms of the media and their accuracy? We know the media in Africa faces very severe issues.**

There are many complexities. Social media demands instant publishing. The processes to secure accurate information are disrupted. Resources are shrinking, and the media industry is struggling with financial sustainability. We need creative solutions, and partnerships between media houses and civil society organisations, to ensure accuracy. How can we collaborate to get this right?

In South Africa, we see that a lot of content is moving behind paywalls. If I’m someone who cannot afford that, where do I go to find accurate information? And that can contribute to creating a vacuum that then allows for misinformation to spread, because I start becoming reliant on Facebook or fake websites to find news. I cannot access anything else. So I really do believe in journalism for the public good, and its central role in creating strong democracies. You’ve got to come together and find solutions to that. It’s critical that we say – as the *Daily Maverick* news service does – “We don’t need to be first; we need to be right.”

**Are you looking at training for journalists and civil society organisations that can strengthen their ability to be accurate? Training on how to access the right people, fact-checking, how to handle controversial issues?**

Yes, we do – and it’s very important. We offer a range of fact-checking trainings for journalists and civil society. It’s important to know where to get accurate data, what are the steps and fact-checking processes you can take to be sure you are accurate, etc. The more skilled one is, the more one breaks away from sensationalist headlines and stories to more accurate, informative information. It also helps because with Covid, everyone is affected; one cannot stand isolated from it. Training can help navigate the space and the fear and uncertainty for individuals who are now working in very difficult circumstances. ❏



# FRIENDS & PARTNERS

Memory Bandera from DefendDefenders reflects on the importance of the Human Rights Commissions Network (HRCnet) partnerships and its achievements.

On the occasion of its 15th anniversary, DefendDefenders reflected on its achievements. These cover virtually all areas of human rights work. While our mandate focuses on the promotion and protection of human rights defenders in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, our programmes and projects cover capacity-building, protection and security management, digital safety, advocacy and research.

However, DefendDefenders would not be what it is today without networks. Bringing human rights defenders and organisations together, pooling resources, exchanging information, and sharing good practices are central to our activities. We would be much less effective without these. In fact, we would be unable to do a lot of the work we do.

## DefendDefenders' networks

In Africa, DefendDefenders hosts and coordinates the Pan-African Human Rights Defenders Network (AfricanDefenders), which itself is made up of five sub-regional networks – one for each sub-region of the continent. AfricanDefenders is responsible for initiatives that make a difference for African human rights defenders, including the 'Ubuntu Hub Cities' relocation initiative.

DefendDefenders is also part of HRCnet. Established in 2006, HRCnet brings together 17 NGOs that engage with the United Nations Human Rights Council. Collectively, we push the Council to do more and to do better. We push the Council to strengthen its impact on the ground – that is, to strengthen respect for human rights and advance the protection of human rights defenders everywhere. HRCnet members work in a coordinated manner and in solidarity; and as a network, we have contributed to some of the most important initiatives of the Human Rights Council, for instance investigative mechanisms such as commissions of inquiry.

## Friends more than partners

Fellow HRCnet members include other regional NGOs from the Global South. Over the years, they have become more than partners; they have become friends. They work in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and globally. We face similar challenges. We engage in shared struggles, at the Human Rights Council and beyond. We share a sense of belonging. Thanks to HRCnet, we are part of a global community of human rights lovers – people who want to see human rights upheld, and every human being respected and their rights and dignity upheld. HRCnet is a unique network. It is focused on making the Human Rights Council more effective, but it is much more than that.



Memory Bandera is the director of programmes and administration at DefendDefenders. She is in charge of programmes, and deals extensively with organisational development and human resources management. Memory is also a founding member of the Girl Child Network Zimbabwe, co-founder of Tariro: Hope and Health for Zimbabwe's Orphans, and the Girl Child Network Uganda.

*A 10 year old boy helps his blind father as they wait in a line to vote at a polling station in Kampala, Uganda, on January 14, 2021. Ugandans began voting in a tense election on January 14 2021 under heavy security and an internet blackout. Veteran leader Yoweri Museveni won a sixth elected term against a former pop star half his age. The internet went down on the eve of the vote, with some parts of the country reporting complete disruptions or significant slowdowns, after one of the most violent election campaigns in years.*



Photo: YASUJOSHI CHIBAN/AFP via Getty Images

**We realise that issues facing human rights defenders in East Africa are similar to issues facing defenders in Brazil, Indonesia and Zimbabwe. Individual cases are different, but the issues are the same. We all fight against power abuse, injustice and impunity.**

### Shared struggles

When we meet with fellow HRCnet members, we learn about their struggles, the human rights violations they fight, and the people they work with. We realise that the issues facing human rights defenders in East Africa are similar to the issues facing defenders in Brazil, Indonesia and Zimbabwe. Individual cases are different, but the issues are the same. We all fight against power abuse, injustice and impunity.

These days, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, meetings tend to take place online. But in 2018, the HRCnet annual meeting took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina. We went there knowing little about the country. Thanks to CELS (a fellow HRCnet member), an amazing human rights organisation, we learned about Argentinian history, the Argentinian people's struggle against dictatorship, and the victims' and survivors' quest for justice. We were lucky to meet with the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo (Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo), who have been trying to locate the children of their children, who the dictatorship (1976-1983) abducted and who disappeared without trace. The Abuelas contributed to taking down the dictatorship.

Everything we learned about the Argentinian people's fight for accountability and justice in that week resonated with our work on the African continent. We were able to learn this because of HRCnet. On a daily basis, HRCnet is a platform for exchanging information. We receive information on human rights issues in Egypt, the Philippines, the US, Russia and China. We share information on developments in Ethiopia, Burundi and Tanzania.

We get to know what our colleagues and friends do, and they get to know what we do. Because HRCnet exists, people in Thailand, Norway and Brazil know how Sudanese human rights defenders organise. Because HRCnet exists, people in Uganda know what issues Belarusian defenders face, how the Chinese state cracks down on lawyers, and how a judicial decision in a Latin American country led to better protections for local indigenous people.

### A sense of solidarity

In terms of Geneva and the Human Rights Council, HRCnet's value is clear. HRCnet members constantly share information and analyses on developments at the Council. They also join forces and act in solidarity, and by example. Ahead of Council

sessions, NGOs routinely prepare calls and letters – documents that outline what we want the Council to do with regard to a specific country.

HRCnet brings a sense of solidarity to everything its members do. Because HRCnet members have built solidarity over the years, calls and letters are truly global. Organisations that are not African sign on to letters on human rights in South Sudan. Organisations that are not Asian sign on to letters on human rights in the Philippines. Organisations that are not from the Middle East sign on to letters on human rights in Saudi Arabia.

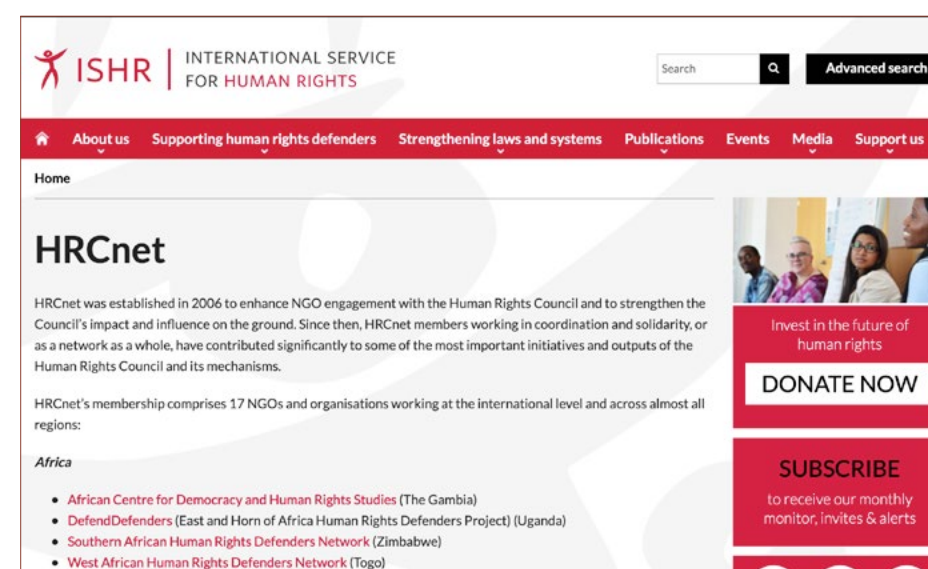
And state representatives now routinely see letters that many organisations support, and not just organisations from the country concerned. And it matters. It shows states that people all over the world care about South Sudan, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia, and want to see human rights improvements in these countries. When an Argentinian organisation such as CELS endorses a call for the release of unjustly detained human rights defenders in Egypt, it outlines an expectation that the Argentinian government will act to try and secure the release of these defenders.

### Partnerships

As all regions of the world have experienced a human rights backlash since the rise of authoritarian populists in the 2010s, human rights actors have experienced a similar set of challenges. At this turning point for human rights and the rule of law worldwide, no human rights organisation can work alone. We need to join forces, and share information, strategies and resources. Beyond formal and informal networks, we need to build partnerships with like-minded actors in the human rights field and beyond.

We need journalists to debunk disinformation and misinformation. We need organisers to help communities affected by human rights violations to claim their rights. We need human rights defenders from all continents to realise that they are in the same boat – and that they have friends and supporters everywhere.

In 2021, as the world struggles to leave the Covid-19 crisis behind and as we advocate for human dignity (universal access to vaccines should be a key policy priority), we will need more partnerships, more networks, and an ever-more-interconnected civil society. 📣



# TRANSFORMING TRADITIONAL JOURNALISM INTO SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM

Lars Tallert explores the concept of 'sustainable journalism'. He argues that a sustainable society requires a journalism that addresses the sustainability challenges. Furthermore, he argues that a sustainable future for journalism, as a practice and business, depends on its capability to do precisely that.

Whenever you engage in journalistic activity, ask yourself: "How does this affect sustainability?" If you do so, you are already on the threshold of practising sustainable journalism.

The concept is obviously about journalism in relation to sustainable development, and departs from two contemporary sustainability crises:

- **The sustainability crisis of society** related to climate change, democracy, poverty, inequality, armed conflicts.
- **The sustainability crisis of journalism** related to decrease in revenues, capture of the media, disinformation, clickbait journalism, deteriorating trust in the media.

Sustainable journalism suggests that these crises are intrinsically intertwined. A sustainable society – economically, ecologically, and socially – requires a journalism that addresses the sustainability challenges facing society; and a sustainable future for journalism as a practice and business depends on its capability to do precisely that.

Sustainable journalism is concerned with how decisions, processes and activities will affect the possibilities for future generations – our children and grandchildren – allowing them to have the same possibilities as our generation.

In relation to sustainability, the mission for the individual journalist may seem simple: the public needs to know how their behaviour and decisions affect sustainability. The individual journalist is also expected to hold power to account, ensuring that the people in power stick to their commitments and make wise decisions related to sustainability.

But if we look at the bigger picture, transforming traditional journalism into sustainable journalism is challenging.

It demands that we redefine the traditional logic of news reporting as a way to describe the status quo – typically focusing on the immediate and geographically close, and preoccupied with reporting on sudden, negative and sensational events.

The concept also expands the traditional role of journalism in society. Journalism has long been seen as a lever for democracy. Sustainable journalism also regards journalism as a lever for sustainability, thereby expanding its potential function and importance in society.

The concept of sustainable journalism was first coined by Ulrika Olausson, Peter Berglez and Mart Ots, professors at Jönköping University in Sweden. Thereafter it was explored by around 25 other international academic media researchers in the anthology *What is Sustainable Journalism?* Presently, a number of researchers and practitioners

**FOJO:**  
MEDIA INSTITUTE  
■ ■ Linnæus University



Lars Tallert is Head of Policy and International Development, Fojo Media Institute at Linnæus University. He is also Sweden's representative to the UNESCO IPDC Intergovernmental Council. During more than thirty years he has been an advisor to governments, media companies, the UN, OECD/DAC and NGOs on issues related to development, communication and journalism. He is presently establishing the Sustainable Journalism Partnership to explore how journalism and sustainability can be interlinked.



Photo: Frank Focis/Photo/Archives/Getty Images



Photo: Wally Swearingen/Bloomberg via Getty Images



Photo: Linnæus University

*Increasing drought and pollution and how it impacts on the world is a global environmental crisis. The concept of sustainable journalism challenges the media to explore how and what they report on and how it will affect future generations. Even more so when it comes to the climate crisis. Martin Luther King had a dream. Sustainable journalism is an effort to shape the dream for future generation. Not just to critique.*

## But do I want to be part of a movement that is only against? Martin Luther King didn't say, "I have a nightmare." He said, "I have a dream." Perhaps it is time for the development community, civil society activists and journalists to also better define what it is we are for?

are exploring how sustainable journalism could be applied in practice, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa.

So; is sustainable journalism something unheard of, something never experienced? Not at all. We see brilliant examples of sustainable journalism every day. But there is no explicit theory or method to actually identify what it is, what the demands are, and how we can foster more journalism to become sustainable. This is why we need to define and introduce the concept of sustainable journalism. By doing so, we will be able to categorise and label it – and from there, incorporate the concept in journalism education, training and content production.

When turning sustainable journalism into practice, we are inspired by several journalistic concepts: solutions-oriented, constructive, gender- and conflict-sensitive, global-local, entrepreneurial and ethical; as well as 'unbreaking news', developed by Rob Weinberg and his colleagues at *De Correspondent*, and the concept of 'factfulness', invented by the Swedish statistician Hans Rosling.

Sustainable journalism is obviously related to financial sustainability, but in this context it does not simply mean that media organisations should be able to make profit, regardless of what content they produce. What is needed is a broader view of media viability, one that looks beyond the money and focuses on quality journalism in combination with profitability. DWA has developed a model based on media viability that encapsulates exactly this approach, incorporating five dimensions related to financial sustainability – economics, politics, content, technology, and the community.

Someone may object: when there are so many different attempts to define new kinds of journalism, do we really need to introduce yet another one?

The answer is yes. Because sustainable journalism is not an ad hoc concept. It relates to the two most important international treaties of our time, both relating to sustainability: Agenda 2030 and the Paris Agreement. The treaties include both global and national commitments, and they are realised through national initiatives as well at municipalities, private companies, civil society organisations and others, making them an ideal arena for journalistic watchdog coverage.

While most media development organisations have focused on how journalism could be seen as part of Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and the answer is always SDG target

16.10 – sustainable journalism turns the tables, and asks: how can journalism make sure that our leaders keep their promises and deliver their undertakings, not only in relation to the SDGs and the Paris Agreement, but on anything related to sustainability? How can journalism inform the public and hold power to account when it comes to the most important challenges and the biggest story of our time – the well-being (and ultimately, the survival) of us as human beings?

We know that human impact on climate change is not a matter of opinion; it is a fact. We know that time is limited; we need to fundamentally transform society, starting immediately. In 10 years, it will already be too late. We also know that practically all world leaders have made strong commitments to sustainability. And we know that a sustainable society – ecologically, socially and economically – requires a journalism that addresses precisely this.

It shouldn't be too difficult to make really good journalism based on this knowledge. Yet, while civil society organisations often do a good job holding power to account in relation to the SDGs, we rarely see journalism doing so – even if, as always, there are brilliant exceptions. Perhaps the logic of 'breaking-news reporting' is too occupied with sudden, sensational and negative events to be able to spot and report on the slow, long-term changes?

Furthermore, the concept of sustainable journalism is based on one of the most important UN reports ever published: *Our Common Future*, also known as the Brundtland report, inspired by the Stockholm Conference in 1972 that introduced environment concerns to the formal political development sphere.

The report states that sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". It also establishes the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, economic and social. It further claims that the many crises facing the planet are interlocking crises, meaning that they are elements of one single global crisis. Hence, there is a need for active participation and cooperation from all sectors of society, in all countries, to ensure a sustainable development.

The importance of the Brundtland report can hardly be overemphasised. More than 30 years after it was written, it constituted the basis for Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. And likewise, it was an invaluable source of inspiration when the Paris Agreement was prepared.

### Having a dream

We live in a time of unprecedented challenges; but also, unprecedented possibilities. Perhaps the internet and social media demonstrate this better than anything else? We have all the knowledge in the world just one fingertip-click away. But this is also true for the endless flood of disinformation, hate speech, harassment and threats that sometimes threatens to drown us.

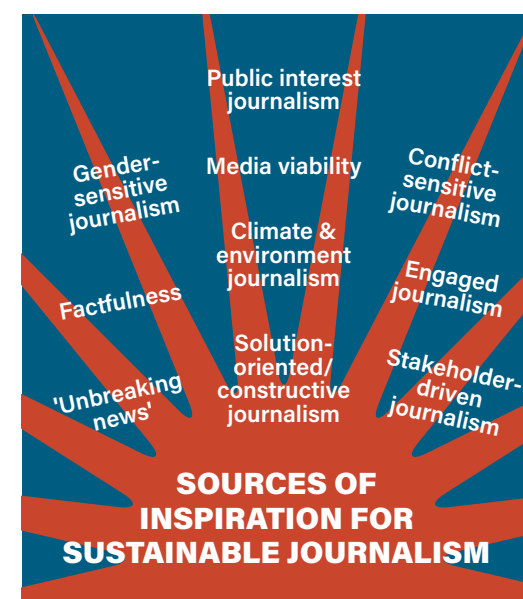
Still, somehow the development agenda seems to be mostly concerned with analysing the problems. And the majority of civil society activists seem to be preoccupied with defining all the things they are against. There is a lot of talk about shrinking space for civil society and freedom of expression, about the crises for journalism, about polarisation, racism, ethnic divides, gender inequality, disinformation, democracy in decline, repression and harassment.

I agree with all of this. But do I want to be part of a movement that is only against? Martin Luther King didn't say, "I have a nightmare." He said, "I have a dream." Perhaps it is time for the development community, civil society activists and journalists to also better define what it is we are for? As journalists, would it be possible to envisage a possible sustainable transformation of society, without deserting our obligation to the truth and our loyalty to the public? I think it is possible; and I believe there are many exciting ideas in the new generation that we need to explore!

Lastly, good journalism is by no means produced only by what is traditionally defined as the media industry. We see lots of content that meets the criteria for sustainable journalism in unexpected places: in academic institutions, in civil society organisations, within government watchdog institutions, on private companies' websites, on professional influencers' YouTube channels and on citizen journalists' digital platforms.

The concept of sustainable journalism has the potential to serve both as a point of departure and as a platform for exploring new possibilities, if we can establish a space – and not a shrinking space, but an expanding one – for collaboration, partnerships and coalitions to contribute to the public discourse in finding solutions to the great challenges of our time; that can hold power to account, and provide the public with the information they need to make informed, sustainable decisions.

The pioneers of sustainable journalism are presently discussing how to establish such a space. We call it the Sustainable Journalism Partnership. We hope you will join us!



### SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM IN PRACTICE

This is an attempt to define an ideal practice of sustainable journalism. It is a work in progress; additional remarks are welcome. Hopefully, these bullet points will serve as inspiration if you wish to participate in the development of the concept.

The foundation is built on established ideals, where journalism:

- as its first obligation, demonstrates the presentation of the truth;
- as its first principle, remains loyal to the idea of public interest;
- is based on fact checking and source verification and a scientific approach, and stands in contrast to disinformation;
- functions as an independent monitor of power, maintaining an independence from those reported on;
- becomes a forum for public criticism and debate;
- communicates what is significant to citizens in an interesting, relevant and engaging way;
- holds those in power to account.



The sustainability challenges of our time require practitioners of sustainable journalism to avoid pretending that they can ‘stand outside reality and objectively describe it’, as if they were free of bias and liberated from their personal experiences and culture.

### THE CHALLENGES OF OUR TIME ARE TO BE THE CENTRAL FOCUS

Besides these more traditional ideals, the sustainability challenges of our time put even higher demands on journalism; namely that it:

- is able to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, addressing the overarching challenges of our time – environmental, economic and social sustainability;
- is gender-sensitive, inclusive and conflict-sensitive. Publishing should be the result of a conscious decision related to consequences. However, publishing may well be defensible even if the consequences are undesirable, if the story contains information that the public needs to know to be able to make informed decisions.
- avoids harmful simplifications and steers clear of news that is meant to shock rather than inform;
- is solution-oriented, not only describing problems but also posing questions that point to possible solutions for a future sustainable world;
- is entrepreneurial, searching for innovative ways to ensure financial independence;
- openly takes on the driving of positive change by reporting about how climate change already impacts people around the world, including natural disasters and extreme weather;
- gives space to voices about climate crises, from acknowledged experts and from those affected;
- reports on innovative initiatives for environmental, social and economic sustainability;
- helps users to live sustainably when reporting on issues such as food, travel and lifestyle;
- undertakes investigations into the economic and political structures that underpin the carbon economy, and examines the role the climate crisis plays in many other critical issues – including inequality, migration and the battle for scarce resources;
- uses a language that recognises the severity of the climate crisis; a language that accurately describes the environmental crises facing the world and that is scientifically precise, while also communicating clearly with readers on the urgency of this issue;
- preferably, is developed through engagement and connection with surrounding society. Participation, interactivity and engagement are key concepts in this context;
- strives to find new ways of telling stories and to explain the world, not least for the younger generation. Visionary storytelling is therefore at the heart of sustainable journalism;
- strives to connect the local with the global. Change may happen locally, but most changes are closely connected to global events and networks – and vice versa;
- may be driven by interest organisations; but if this is the case, the obligation to tell the truth and loyalty to citizens must come as a first priority. Distorted or incomplete information can never be considered sustainable journalism, even if it would serve a higher purpose or agenda.
- requires that practitioners of sustainable journalism not only master professional journalistic skills, but also have thorough thematic knowledge of the overarching challenges of our time, such as climate change, democracy, equality, gender equity and inclusion.
- requires practitioners of sustainable journalism to avoid pretending that they can ‘stand outside reality and objectively describe it’, as if they were free of bias and liberated from their personal experiences and culture. This was not what pioneers of modern journalism meant when they invented the concept of ‘objective journalism’. It was out of a growing recognition that journalists were full of bias, often unconsciously. Objectivity called for journalists to develop a consistent method of testing information – a transparent approach to evidence – so that personal and cultural biases would not undermine the accuracy of their work. This approach is also valid for sustainable journalism.

### TRANSPARENCY IS A PRECONDITION FOR SUSTAINABLE JOURNALISM

It is not just the content that determines whether journalism is sustainable or not; it is also the transparency of the company or organisation behind the publication.

Publishers should:

- strive to never publish false content. If false content is published by mistake, it must be rapidly corrected;
- refer to fact-checked sources, preferably first-hand information or trustworthy, credible second-hand news sources;
- transparently account for the sources and working methods that have been used when publishing a story;
- avoid deceptive headlines that contain false information, or otherwise do not reflect what is actually in the story;
- not distort or misrepresent information to make an argument;
- distinguish opinion from news reporting in a responsible manner. If the reporting expresses a particular point of view, this should be clearly stated – including who expresses the view, and from what perspective it is conveyed;
- clearly display which content is paid for and which is not;
- clearly and accessibly provide the names of content creators, along with either contact or brief biographical information;
- make clear how an error or complaint by a reader/viewer/listener should be reported;
- establish effective practices for publishing clarifications and corrections, and note corrections in a transparent way;
- clearly disclose ownership and/or financing, as well as any notable ideological or political positions held by those with a significant financial interest in the site, in a user-friendly manner.

### PRODUCTION OF NEWS MUST BE SUSTAINABLE

The production process must comply with the demands of social, economic and environmental sustainability. This could be a very long list; but as conditions vary depending on the size and nature of the publishing unit, here are just some examples:

- set targets (including reducing carbon emissions) in line with science-based methodology;
- cut the use of single-use plastic;
- develop a detailed long-term plan on how to achieve net zero emissions;
- buy renewable electricity;
- offer training and awareness capacity-building for staff on sustainability;
- strive to follow the guidelines of the UN Global Compact and Certified B Corporations. ▶



# COLLABORATION, DISRUPTION & INNOVATION

Jamlab has worked to connect like-minded media innovators, journalists and social entrepreneurs in order to give them the opportunity to engage with one another on subjects that typically do not get the exposure they deserve.

The saying ‘Amid every crisis lies opportunity’ couldn’t have rung more true for many innovators across the African continent when the Covid-19 pandemic hit and left many scrapping for a living. One such innovator was Nash TV’s programmes manager, DJ Butterphly Phunk.

Often when journalism is a topic of discussion, it seems current affairs, general news, politics and sports are the beats that have become known to many audiences. Niche beats such as entertainment rarely come to the fore, or receive similar attention. A total ban on larger gatherings in Zimbabwe left many musicians destitute and without the means to take care of their families. It was at this juncture that Nash TV, a solely visual entertainment media organisation, was born.

According to Phunk, the main purpose for this platform was to entertain audiences. Although their idea was not the first of its kind, in Zimbabwe it’s the only one still standing, and one that goes the extra mile in not only entertaining audiences, but also establishing relationships with the musicians who appear on the show.

Nash TV’s unique selling proposition is that it treats these artists like a project of their own, nurturing them and aggressively marketing their work. In a short space of time, Nash TV has garnered a large following, and even funding that will aid the growth of their work.

My colleagues and I at Jamlab (short for the Journalism and Media Lab) know that there are many other stories like Nash TV across the African continent. At Jamlab we believe in the ‘classical’ approach to innovation, which often takes the form of ‘disruptive innovation’.

Some of the most important innovation work that needs to be done relates rather to repair – to trying to fix parts of the media system that just aren’t working for people. And we believe that by raising awareness of this type of work, others throughout the continent could be equally inspired.

Since 2017, Jamlab has worked to connect like-minded media innovators, journalists and social entrepreneurs in order to give them the opportunity to engage with one another on subjects that typically do not get the exposure they deserve.

We have done this through three programmes, which were designed to be mutually reinforcing. These are the knowledge programme (online magazine, newsletter and other digital platforms), where we’ve provided reviews of new research and reporting technologies, and many other resources for working African journalists; a six-month accelerator programme; and the Community of Practice (an event series). We used the magazine to report and publicise the other programmes, and



*Tshepo Tshabalala is the Director of the Journalism and Media Lab (Jamlab) in Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand.*

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as an important source of content on innovation practices and ideas.

In the same year we hosted our first journalism and media accelerator programme, which sets out to bring new media services to South Africa with the aim of addressing some of the broken parts of the media ecosystem. Kathy Magrobi, for example, joined the second iteration of the programme with just a concept, an idea on paper. By the end of her six-month journey on the Jamlab Accelerator, she had developed Quote This Woman+, a new platform listing credible experts on issues relating to women and under-represented voices that newsrooms can easily access and rely on.

During her initial research, which guided the evolution of her platform, she found that the representation of women and other marginalised voices was far more absent than present in South Africa's popular media. Magrobi is one of six entrepreneurs in the programme who have succeeded in garnering investment in order to continue to develop her venture.

For the fourth iteration of the accelerator programme we scaled the project into the rest of the continent. We found eight start-ups, from Madagascar, Zambia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, eSwatini and Angola, who will potentially transform information, conversations and the public sphere in their respective countries.

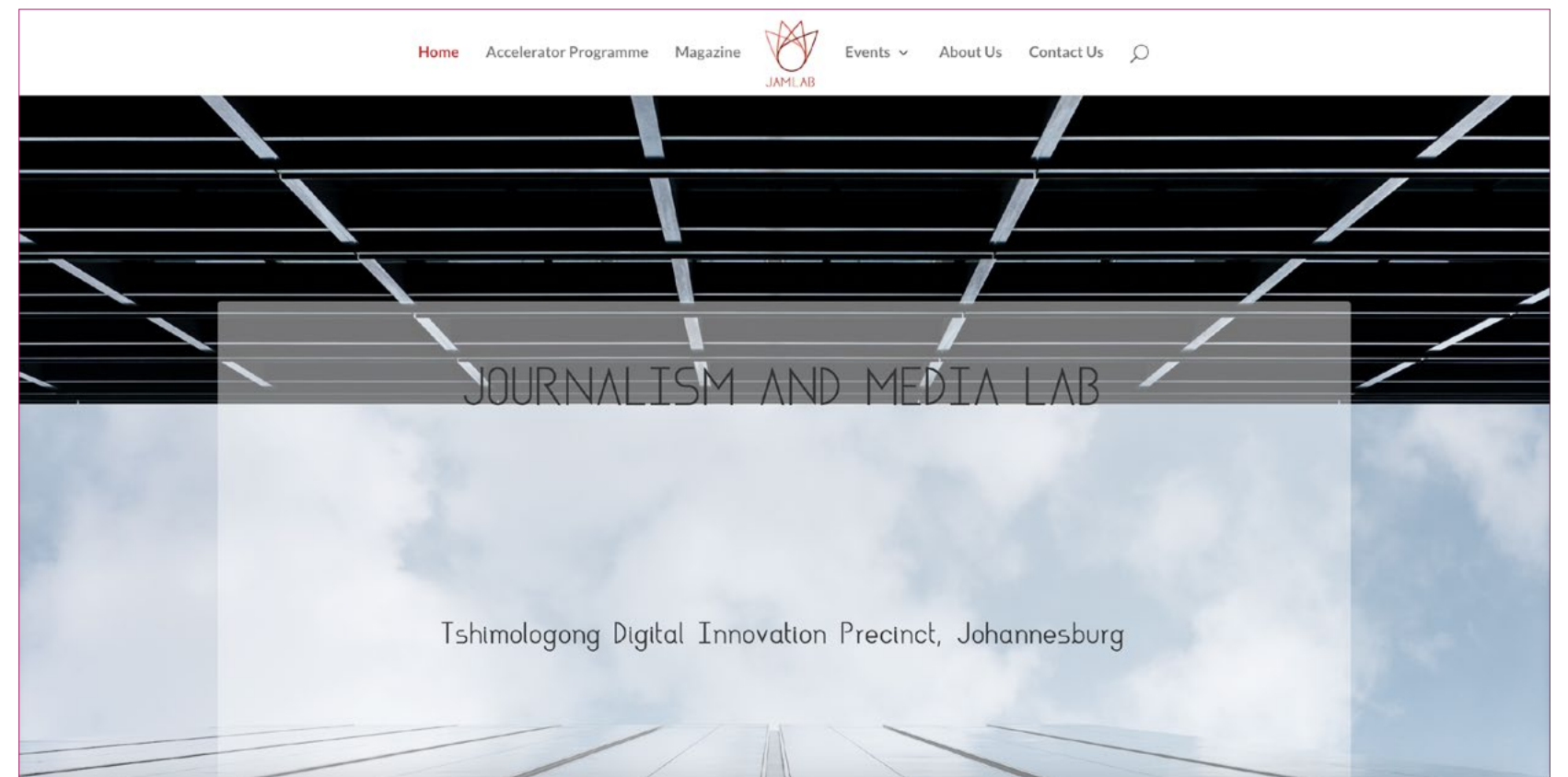
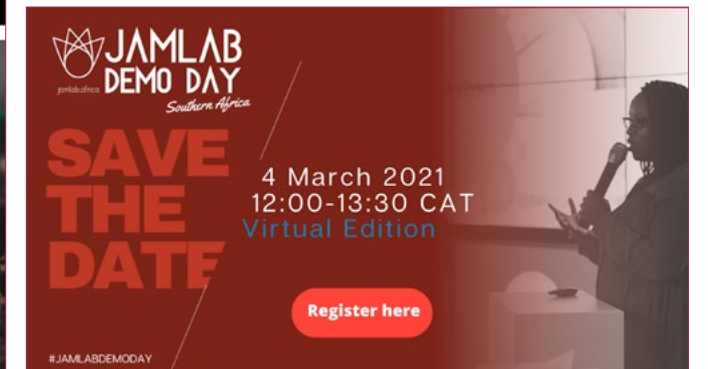
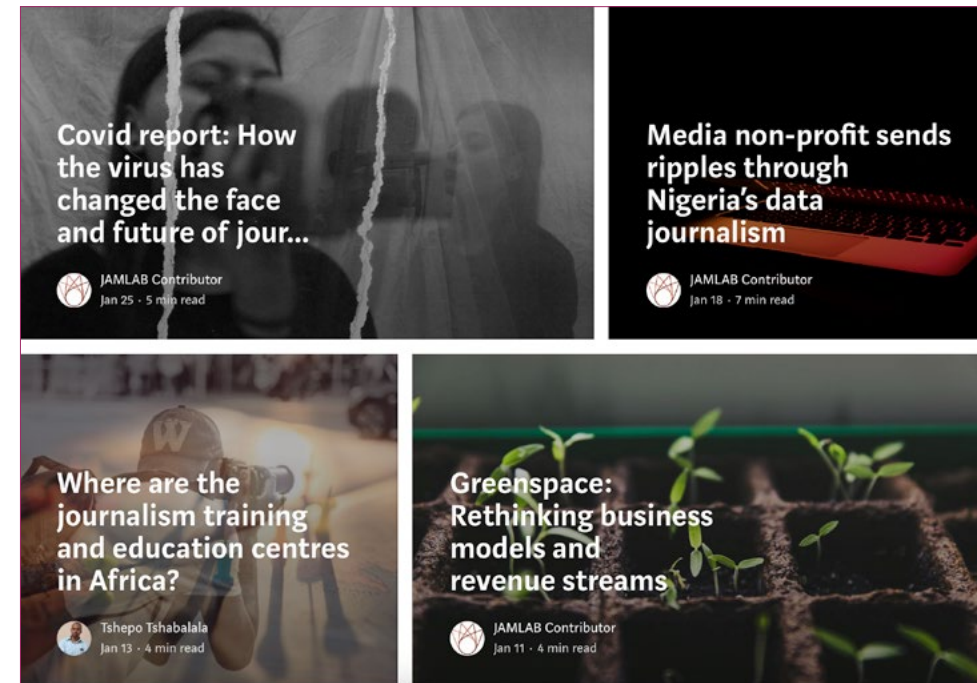
We look forward to incoming cohorts with great ideas who are ready to repair and disrupt the media ecosystem across the African continent. To date we've accelerated 24 teams, of which 13 are women-led start-ups; and six of these received external funding during or after the accelerator.

Over the past three and a half years we've convened gatherings of journalists and media makers from around the continent to share knowledge and build a community of practice. We've learnt that there are many opportunities to innovate, to deliver new services, to reach new audiences, and for media to play more roles in building informed societies.

Since 2017 we've been collaborating with the Civic Tech Innovation Network, where more often than not our work has many overlaps, linking civil society with journalists in order to share impactful communication methods. This partnership has allowed both organisations to tap into and reach audiences from each other's worlds.

After not even four years since its inception, Jamlab's story is just taking off. Building a knowledge hub for innovations such as DJ Butterphly Phunk's Nash TV and Magrobi's Quote This Woman+, sharing newsroom tools and skills, and collaborating with media start-ups is not easy – but it is needed. African journalists and media houses face many of the same problems so familiar to the rest of the world: shrinking newsrooms, failing business models, threats from governments and wide internet shutdowns.

Following a tumultuous year marred by a global pandemic that decimated human life and many industries, including journalism and media, the next few months and years are likely to be just as turbulent. At Jamlab, we will continue to think about and work on how to build resilience, through building networks across borders that can provide better support and solidarity for independent media. ✎





# STANDING WITNESS TO HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

David Kode argues that in the future, it will be imperative to strengthen coalitions of civil society groups, the media and human rights defenders to act in solidarity. These coalitions will bring together groups working on environmental, land and indigenous rights, the rights of women, media rights, and the rights of LGBTI communities. As these coalitions 'stand as their witness', they will amplify the voices of those targeted by the state. It is a critical need, as the world – and Africa – strive for more 'open' societies.

In what has now become a familiar pattern, Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono has been arrested – again, for the third term in a period of six months.

This time the Zimbabwean authorities have accused him of peddling falsehoods. He was arrested previously in November 2020 on charges of 'obstruction of justice' and 'demeaning Zimbabwe's National Prosecuting Authority', barely two months after he was released on bail following a previous arrest in July 2020.

At the centre of the arrests and judicial persecution of Hopewell Chin'ono is his courageous investigative journalism; this new wave of persecution began after he reported on alleged corruption by Zimbabwe's Health Ministry in the procurement of Covid-19 supplies.

The arrest and judicial persecution of Hopewell Chin'ono is symptomatic of the challenges faced by journalists and human rights defenders across the world. Seen in the context of civic space – defined as a set of universally accepted rules which allow people to organise, participate and communicate with each other freely and without hindrance – a recent report by the CIVICUS Monitor reveals that only 3.4% of the world's population live in countries rated 'open'. An 'open' rating for civil society means citizens, journalists, human rights defenders and civil society groups are able to express their views on issues affecting the state without any form of reprisal from the authorities.

In Africa specifically, the findings of the report highlight the fact that the detention of journalists is number one on the list of the top five human rights violations on the continent. From Burundi to Zimbabwe, Cameroon, Guinea and Uganda, authorities target human rights defenders and journalists for simply reporting on the excesses of the state, for highlighting corrupt practices and human rights violations. Once arrested, they are accused of the most serious charges available, including attempting to destabilise the state, colluding with foreign powers, terrorism, and attempting to foment an insurrection. Such charges often also carry the most serious penalties.

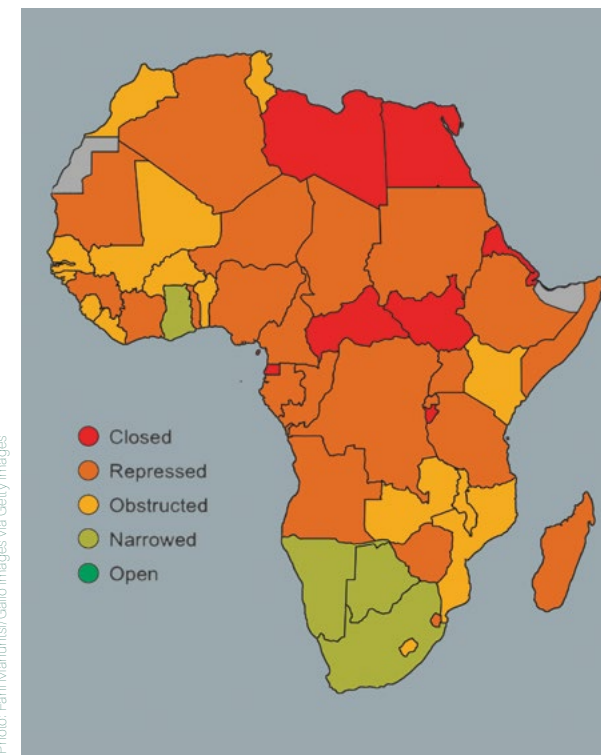
### What is the 'Standasmywitness' campaign?

Often characterised by states as 'criminals', human rights defenders and journalists facing persecution are subjected to unfair judicial processes; and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, they are exposed to adverse health conditions in prisons and detention centres. In many instances, subjecting



David Kode is head of Advocacy and Campaigns at CIVICUS, a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society throughout the world. It was established in 1993, and since 2002 has been proudly headquartered in Johannesburg, South Africa, with additional hubs across the globe. It is a membership alliance with more than 10 000 members in more than 175 countries.

The CIVICUS definition of civil society is broad, covering non-governmental organisations, activists, civil society coalitions and networks, protest and social movements, voluntary bodies, campaigning organisations, charities, faith-based groups, trade unions and philanthropic foundations. Its membership is diverse, spanning a wide range of issues, sizes and organisation types.



FAR LEFT: A Zimbabwean national, Hlevani Matikiti protests at the entrance to the University of Johannesburg during the funeral of the late Andrew Mlangeni and against the arrest of Zimbabwean journalists on July 29, 2020.

ABOVE: At the time Zimbabwean journalist Hopewell Chin'ono and opposition politician Jacob Ngarivhume were arrested on charges of inciting public violence. They were denied bail and remanded in custody.

LEFT: The map on the left depicts "openness" of African countries.

## The appellation ‘Standasmywitness’ is borrowed from the words of Said Zahari, a former editor-in-chief of Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, himself a prisoner of conscience who was detained for 17 years without trial in Singapore; he called on those who had a voice to speak out, to ‘stand as his witness.’

them to these conditions, and to the might of the military and the state, means these brave human rights defenders are unable to speak for themselves while in detention. Some are denied contact with family and/or legal representation; while on occasion, some are denied access to medical assistance. Others are subjected to unfair legal processes, and even in detention, their rights are taken away from them.

It was as a result of this that global civil society alliance CIVICUS, together with more than 190 civil society organisations, launched the ‘Standasmywitness’ campaign in July 2020, to raise awareness regarding the state of human rights defenders who are subjected to judicial persecution and detention, and to advocate for their release. The appellation ‘Standasmywitness’ is borrowed from the words of Said Zahari, a former editor-in-chief of Malay-language newspaper *Utusan Melayu*, himself a prisoner of conscience who was detained for 17 years without trial in Singapore; he called on those who had a voice to speak out, to ‘stand as his witness.’

The campaign was launched following consultations with representatives of civil society across the world, and was first publicised on 18 July, Nelson Mandela Day; because like the former South African President, who spent 27 years in jail, many human rights defenders are persecuted and jailed for standing for freedom, human rights and democratic values.

The campaign presents an opportunity to forge coalitions, and highlights the significance of solidarity between groups working on civil society issues, human rights defenders, and the media. It sheds light on the detention of human rights defenders such as Germain Rukuki, who was sentenced to 32 years in prison by the Burundian authorities – following a deeply flawed judicial process – on trumped-up charges of rebellion and threatening state security. It advocates for the release of Cameroonian journalist Mancho Bibixy, who was arrested in January 2018 and later sentenced to 15 years in prison on charges of terrorism, secession and inciting civil war, for speaking out against the human rights violations in Cameroon’s Anglophone communities.

The campaign continues to advocate for an end to the persecution and detention of woman human rights defenders, activists working on environmental, land and indigenous rights, and journalists raising

concerns about governance issues across the continent. Since it was launched in July 2020, the campaign has worked with civil society partners at national and regional level to successfully advocate for the release of human rights defenders and journalists in Niger and Burundi.

The different ratings on the state of civic space in different countries in Africa are indicative of the human rights condition and the treatment of human rights defenders and journalists on the continent. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, of the 49 countries rated, six are rated as ‘closed’ – meaning any overt advocacy at national level by civil society or critical reporting by journalists is likely to lead to the arrest and detention of representatives of civil society, or forceful disappearance or even death at the hands of the authorities.

Only two countries have an ‘open’ civic space rating, while 21 are rated ‘repressed’, six are rated ‘narrowed’ and 14 are rated ‘obstructed’.

The targeting of human rights defenders and journalists increases during politically sensitive periods such as elections, or when constitutions are amended. Over the last several months, for example, the ‘Standasmywitness’ campaign has profiled human rights defenders from Niger, Togo and Cote d’Ivoire in West Africa, and from Uganda and Tanzania, as there was a marked increase in the targeting of civil society in these countries ahead of and during elections in 2020.

Those who report on and advocate against corrupt practices, indigenous and environmental rights, the rights of women and LGBTI communities are often more susceptible to attack from both state and non-state actors.

### Looking ahead

A major call from the campaign to African governments has been to release human rights defenders, journalists and activists in prison, as a means of decongesting prison populations and detention centres to curb the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But since the start of the pandemic, several governments have used the pandemic itself as a pretext for targeting human rights defenders and journalists. Emergency measures imposed at the start of the pandemic to limit the movement of persons and enforce social distancing measures

were often accompanied by the arrest of journalists and human rights defenders – for covering peaceful protests, and writing about state responses to the pandemic.

As states navigate through the social and economic repercussions of the pandemic, it is anticipated that citizens will demand more action from governments to facilitate an inclusive post-Covid economic recovery process that will take into account the needs of excluded and marginalised groups. We are likely to see more scrutiny of government policies and actions, and more protests against rising inequality. This will trigger reprisals from authoritarian leaders, who will impose restrictions to silence journalists and human rights defenders and force them to self-censor.

It will be imperative to strengthen coalitions of civil society groups, the media and human rights defenders, to act in solidarity through campaigns such as ‘Standasmywitness’. Such coalitions will bring together groups working on environmental, land and indigenous rights, the rights of women, media rights and the rights of LGBTI communities. As these coalitions ‘stand as their witness’, they will amplify the voices of those targeted by the state, and engage in advocacy activities to secure their release from detention. ■



# INTEGRATING JOURNALISTS INTO THE HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AGENDA

Samwel Mohochi writes about the National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (NCHRD) that was set up in western Africa and which brought together journalists, activists and others working in the field of human rights. He argues that it brought significant advantages, particularly in the quality of reporting and the support for journalists.

The National Coalition of Human Rights Defenders (NCHRD) is a national membership organisation that aims to champion the safety, security and well-being of human rights defenders (HRDs). It was established in November 2007, and registered as a charitable trust.

The NCHRD was a result of commitments made in the Entebbe Plan of Action of 2005, in which various members undertook to organise national coalitions in the six member countries in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. It serves as a network of human rights defenders.

The broad membership of the Defenders Coalition (the NCHRD in Kenya) includes Kenyan human rights organisations, human rights defender groupings, community-based groups and faith-based groups working in the field to protect human rights. The mixed membership enabled individual journalists to become members of the coalition, and this led to enriched human rights reporting. The Coalition became particularly relevant in trying to protect human rights defenders who faced recriminations.

At the inception of the Coalition a general plan of action was developed in a participatory manner, specifically developing proactive and reactive interventions that included:

- training and capacity building for HRDs;
- strengthening the regional representatives;
- availing expertise;
- availing resources;
- creating a monitoring system;
- creating a rapid response system;
- provision of legal and psychosocial support ;
- identifying and supporting defenders at risk;
- engaging in high-level policy dialogue with duty bearers to advance the protection of HRDs.

The Coalition was to maintain a skeleton secretariat while working with members and elected representatives in the regions.

In early December 2008 Kenya held its general and presidential elections, resulting in a disputed presidential-election result. This led to general anarchy, and extrajudicial killings by state officials (over 400 shootings are documented). Another 1 000 more killings were perpetrated by non-state actors, and widespread displacement of over 300 000 people, wanton looting and destruction of property occurred.

Human rights defenders intervened between January and March 2018, documenting the atrocities that occurred. At the height of the violence, prominent human rights defenders with visibility at national level, and who were public commentators providing alternative opinion in mainstream media, came under severe attack. Many received death threats, and members of their families were targeted. Attacks were widespread on social media platforms and in person.



Samwel Mohochi is an advocate at Mohochi & Company Advocates in Kenya.



Supporters of the Kenyan opposition presidential candidate protests in the Mathare slums of Nairobi on August 9, 2017, a day after the presidential election.

Photo: Luis Babu/AFP via Getty Images



The hybrid membership of the Coalition has ensured a network of HRDs and journalists who work in this area. It has connected hundreds of freelancers and independent activists to each other, and to available resources and support systems. It has enriched the human rights agenda, and offers immediately improved protection to the most vulnerable; and it has made wider sharing and distribution of information possible.

These ranged from mild verbal threats, to disruptions (for example, of news photo exhibitions), to extremely life-threatening and in some cases deadly actual attacks on defenders. The Coalition immediately intervened by offering temporary internal and external relocations to safe houses, and provided support to defenders at risk.

When a political settlement was reached in March 2008, a secret military operation was ordered in the Mount Elgon region of western Kenya to deal with an insurgency by the Sabao Land Defence Force (SLDF). The mountainous area was sealed off from the mainstream media, with only a few members of the Kenya Correspondents Association (KCA – a member of the Coalition) able to continue the reporting of the atrocities. A number of journalists faced recriminations, and the Coalition had to intervene in an attempt to ameliorate the situation.

The existence of the Coalition resulted in improved reporting by journalists on atrocities and human rights issues in the area. It also resulted in improved support and protection of journalists and other HRDs. Human rights violations were better and more widely reported, ensuring that overall case reporting on extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, atrocities, group violence and other human rights violations could be documented more accurately and reported to the International Criminal Court process of 2010 to 2018.

In 2016-2017, Section 29 of Kenya's Information and Communication Act (KICA) was increasingly being used to target bloggers and defenders of human rights. HRDs, journalists and activists who challenged senior government officials at national and county level with respect to accountability, integrity and corruption were often targeted and Section 29 used to silence them.

This law was deliberately being used to persecute the HRDs, who were at times violently arrested. The Coalition had to rapidly secure their release on bail, and provide legal representation and general support to ensure their safety. The coalition was ultimately involved in the litigation that successfully challenged the constitutionality of Section 29 of KICA. The High Court in Kenya subsequently declared Section 29 unconstitutional.

The coalition strengthened the ability of journalists and defenders to use freedom of information requests effectively, broadened and deepened their ability to do impactful investigative journalism, and made the space for defenders and journalists slightly safer.

The coalition further worked to set agreed standards

for reporting on elections. These were developed jointly with the Media Council of Kenya.

In a system where media houses and platforms are often controlled by owners, and at the mercy of the state, who are key advertisers on those platforms, it is particularly important for the Coalition to support independent journalists and platforms. The Coalition also works for the improvement of remuneration for journalists.

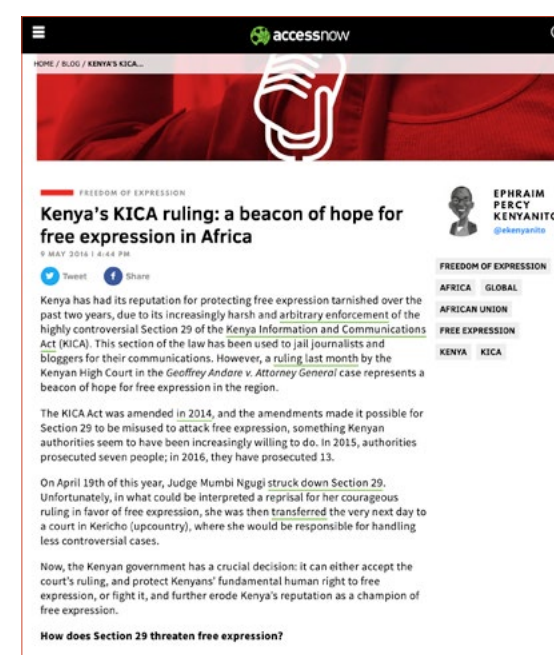
The hybrid membership of the Coalition has ensured a network of HRDs and journalists who work in this area. It has connected hundreds of freelancers and independent activists to each other, and to available resources and support systems. It has enriched the human rights agenda, and offers immediately improved protection to the most vulnerable; and it has made wider sharing and distribution of information possible.

Some lessons learnt include:

- Interventions in a crisis are best designed in a participatory manner to factor in the risk level to the defender and the uniqueness of the risks, and should be assessed on a case-by-case basis.
- The strength of the Coalition lies in the harnessing of the diversity of the membership.
- Interventions, both proactive and reactive, can be developed by the members of the Coalition, factoring in any unique and peculiar regional features.
- The focus of the work is always on prevention of risk, and on mitigating and managing the risk.
- Coalitions survive because of (or fail due to a lack of) participatory leadership, clarity on their mandate, accountability and transparency to the membership, and clear and simple procedures and processes.

Another main advantage of the Coalition is that it opens its membership to a broad range of actors who stand in defence of human rights, including minority communities, labour movement unions, community-based groups, national-based groups and individuals who can demonstrate human rights work in the community.

The National Coalition for Human Rights Defenders has and continues to remain alive to its niche; which is to only intervene in matters of protection for HRDs, to maintain a lean secretariat, to tap into and utilise the expertise of its members on a pro bono basis at times, and to make more proactive interventions for prevention – which appears to have strengthened the Coalition and given it the relevant visibility, thereby earning it its institutional credibility in Kenya. **M**



In a file photo, residents of Nairobi's Kibera slum follows the presidential election while awaiting official results in October 2017.



# INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM & ADVOCACY: NATURAL ALLIES?

Anne Koch discusses the relationship between the media and NGOs. She argues that the relationship between the two should be discussed more widely and made more transparent, and that with careful calibration there is greater room for cooperation – without a concomitant loss of independence or integrity.

Corruption is the target of both investigative journalists and anti-corruption NGOs such as Transparency International, Global Witness and others.

While at Transparency International (TI), I launched a collaborative initiative with the investigative journalism network, the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP). TI has about 100 national affiliates or chapters around the globe, working to combat corruption. OCCRP, for its part, is an investigative reporting platform formed by more than 40 non-profit investigative centres, scores of journalists, and several major regional news organisations across the world; they do transnational investigative reporting, and promote technology-based approaches to exposing organised crime and corruption worldwide.

Investigative journalists are naming the corrupt; but too often there is little follow-up, and the corrupt often get away with it. The new OCCRP-TI project is structured so that OCCRP will investigate and expose, and TI will take up a number of stories or cases and undertake advocacy and campaigning work around each case to press for longer-term change. Nevertheless, the partnership raises thorny issues about co-operation between investigative journalists and NGOs.

Some years ago, as a senior manager at the BBC, I co-led a global investigation into the cross-border trade in asbestos with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), *Dangers in the Dust: Inside the Global Asbestos Trade*. White asbestos, which the industry prefers to label as chrysotile, is a cancer-causing fibre which kills about 100 000 workers a year, according to the International Labour Organisation. While asbestos is banned or restricted in much of the world, it is aggressively marketed in developing countries.

Our joint investigation revealed the tactics used by the makers of asbestos building materials to market their products to poorer countries. The multiple cases and stories produced by the partnership made a substantial impact. The findings were not only covered by about 250 media outlets in more than 20 languages; they were also used by public health activists and concerned politicians in countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico and Canada.

ICIJ has compiled evidence of the impact the collaboration made; they do this routinely. Later, reviewing the impact, I thought that we could have been even more systematic in the way we collaborated and shared information during and after our work was published. And as a journalist, this was by no means the first time I had pause for thought about how we might increase our impact by working with campaigning organisations.



Global Investigative Journalism Network



Anne Koch is a UK-based journalist, and currently the Programme Director at the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN, [gijn.org](http://gijn.org)), the world's largest international network of non-profit investigative journalism organisations, with more than 200 member organisations in 80 countries. Prior to that Anne worked at the global anti-corruption organisation Transparency International (TI), as Director of the largest regional department, Europe and Central Asia. Before that her award-winning career in BBC journalism included service as deputy director of the English World Service, executive editor of the BBC's flagship radio news and current affairs programmes, and editor of *The World Tonight*. She has produced or edited over 100 documentaries.

## Reviewing the impact of the work, I thought that we could have been more systematic in the way we collaborated and shared information during and after the journalism was published.

The relationship between investigative journalists and NGOs, whether working on corruption or on other issues, has always been complex and nuanced, because their roles often overlap. For as long as I can remember this has been debated and worried over, with claims that the relationship needed redefinition. There is a long history of both collaboration and antagonism between the two; but due to wider changes briefly touched upon below, there has been a massive blurring of the lines. The relationship between the two, it is argued here, should be discussed more widely, made more transparent; and with careful calibration, there is greater room for co-operation – without a concomitant loss of independence or integrity.

Although the relationship between journalists and NGOs is not new, the effects of digital disruption – with the explosion of choice, and the empowerment (as many would see it) of audiences, as well as their influence on the agenda and the low levels of trust for journalists – have muddied the waters. In the context, too, of the dominance of the tech giants, the decline in revenue and disappearance of once reliable business models in a mere decade, not to mention the general decline in traditional journalism, the line between professionally trained journalists and alternative investigation and newsgathering has blurred. The economics fuelling this trend has been well documented; some of the money has gone online, sometimes to fake news.

Much investigative journalism is now being carried out by relatively small organisations, themselves: NGOs that raise funds from foundations, private donors, companies and governments; a trend that started in the mid-1970s but has accelerated with the collapse of orthodox business models.

In addition, one recent wide-ranging study has documented the growth of what its authors call 'stakeholder-driven media', a 'stunning range of actors who control their own media and use those media to directly affect individuals, communities, organisations and society'. This is at the expense of the mainstream media who have lost their share of previous agenda-setting influence at the expense of the stakeholder-driven media. This has been accompanied, unsurprisingly, by a sometimes hostile debate about what journalism is and who is qualified to do it, and increasing and unprecedented threats to journalists the world over, where the challenges are huge and varied and include intimidation, violence, media concentration and political control.

Journalists in parts of the media, particularly in North America and Europe, have long relied on a shield of impartiality or objectivity and adhere to strict editorial guidelines when dealing with campaigners, charities and other NGOs. Impartiality as defined by the BBC, as its head of news has argued, "is not the same as objectivity or balance or neutrality ... [a]t its simplest it means not taking sides ... about providing a breadth of view." This is at odds with the mission of NGOs. But the concepts of impartiality and objectivity are increasingly questioned and proponents for a so-called post-impartial world are growing, as are the number of journalists who speak openly and often critically about the constraints of impartiality.

In many – if not most – parts of the world, the liberal Western model of the necessary separation between journalism and activism is not understood, let alone recognised – one literally can be a journalist in the morning, an activist in the afternoon and a blogger in the evening. I discussed this with young journalists and activists in Moscow, to cite one example, and they didn't understand my concern with the blurring of lines. The work of NGOs in the area of journalism and investigative journalism is important, too, where there is a lot of media concentration or where media freedom is weak or non-existent. In those environments, a lot of the work on investigating and publicising corruption is done by NGOs.

It is in this context that TI and OCCRP struck up a novel partnership. The initiative was launched as the Global Anti-Corruption Consortium. As well as investigating stories, OCCRP will build a global networked platform, while TI will advocate and campaign for longer-term change. This might involve a national or global campaign; it might mean taking steps to try and ensure that the corrupt are prosecuted; in other cases it will be to try and address the systemic causes that lead to corruption – a corrupt judiciary, lax enforcement of money-laundering laws, and others. TI hopes, too, where possible, to be able to seek redress for victims of cases of grand corruption.

Both organisations also hope that in time it will extend to other NGOs and investigative journalists, because greater cooperation with other like-minded and independent NGOs is also needed. As Drew Sullivan, founder, editor and director of OCCRP, and a TI partner, said to me, "You have reporters investigate a problem. Then activists. Then police. In the three different investigations, information is lost and knowledge is not passed through. It's inefficient. We need to share our information better."

There is no doubt that the cooperation raises big issues – ethical issues, security issues, a clash of interests and so on. However, in this project both TI and OCCRP are clear that co-operation will be enhanced further by mutual freedom and the maintenance of each party's independence, structured and flexible cooperation (not coordination per se), and trust. We will cooperate on the basis of clear evidence and data, with an understanding that each party has a different job to do. Cooperation will be limited, and each organisation has its own staff, legal support and objectives; and we have clear protocols about sharing information.

If there is a joint commitment to independence, truth and transparency with each other and with audiences or constituencies about conflicts, as well as how successes are achieved, we hope the project will lead to greater impact. It should be noted that we are experimenting, and our collaboration may not be entirely new – we just want to make it more systematic.

This partnership is coalescing at a moment when many North American and Western European journalists increasingly have to contend with new colleagues who don't fit their assumptions of what a journalist is. Many people who neither have professional qualifications nor work in organisations with an editorial structure are out there writing and shaping public opinion – the two most read blogs during the last UK election, for instance, were from non-journalists.

Moreover, trained journalists and researchers are being hired by campaigning, non-governmental organisations to publish investigative stories. Entities trying out new models include ProPublica, the Kaiser Foundation and Open Secrets in the US, as well as some of the national chapters affiliated with TI in Russia, Honduras, Montenegro and the Czech Republic – to cite a handful. Global Witness, for example, employs journalists and has both initiated and investigated major stories that have been picked up by major media outlets such as *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and ABC News.

Drew Sullivan from OCCRP believes that we are experiencing "a Gutenberg moment" – and that we must catch up with changing times. What we have traditionally called 'journalism' is disappearing because of the above-mentioned blurring of roles between activists, bloggers, citizen journalists, watchdogs and journalists.

*In 2010 the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and the BBC released a report titled Dangers in the Dust: Inside the Global Asbestos Trade which revealed tactics by asbestos manufacturers to market their dangerous products to poorer countries. The findings were covered by about 250 media outlets in more than 20 languages and were also used by public health activists and concerned politicians in countries such as Brazil, India, Mexico and Canada.*



Getty Images

**The mainstream media have lost their share of previous agenda-setting influence at the expense of the stakeholder-driven media. This has been accompanied, unsurprisingly, by a sometimes hostile debate about what journalism is and who is qualified to do it, and increasing and unprecedented threats to journalists the world over, where the challenges are huge and varied and include intimidation, violence, media concentration, and political control.**

“If you can’t tell them apart, they are doing the same thing,” states Sullivan. “They are all investigators. Journalists don’t need to be activists – we just need to agree on the findings.” He believes we need to define new roles and confront persistent corruption with “truth, activism and good policy, an enterprise that is at the heart of democracy, by building networks of like-minded investigators.” And this is why OCCRP is building a collaborative platform where journalists and NGOs can share information. “Journalism ethics are important, but so is the power and money of crime and corruption in the developing world. We’re losing the battle. Badly.”

But why would an NGO such as TI want to cooperate with investigative journalists? The first reason is to share essential evidence and facts – it really is as basic as that. Investigators (both journalists and law enforcement professionals) simply have more experience and know-how in investigating cases, and often journalists have been more open to sharing information than law enforcement agencies, although of course the latter play a role in the wider picture. Good investigative journalists provide documents and evidence, the material that NGOs need to do their advocating and campaigning.

The Panama Papers case is an obvious recent example, as are the so-called Lux Leaks documents. These cases gave rise to extensive work by some NGOs on whistleblowing policy and the role of accountancy firms as enablers of corruption and tax avoidance – numerous others could be cited.

A second vital reason is impact. Journalists are often better able to package and disseminate findings, and to reach bigger audiences. When Global Witness carried out an undercover investigation of lawyers in New York City and shared their findings with CBS’s *60 Minutes* programme, this assured an audience of millions. In other cases, it’s about targeting a particular constituency of readers or viewers. Journalism also helps to shape public opinion against sleaze in government, scrutinises laws and regulations, and can prompt governments to respond. One of the most challenging areas in combating corruption is to figure out what has an impact – in short, what works.

A key piece of evidence comes from TI itself. It conducted an extensive survey of business management in 30 countries on the best ways to fight corruption, gathering responses from 3 000 business people across 13 sectors including real

estate, banking, mining, and so on. The survey asked them to rank the effectiveness of six measures, from corporate due diligence to national anti-bribery laws to international treaties. Investigative journalism came out on top: business people in 20 of the 30 countries surveyed chose investigative journalism as the most effective tool at fighting corruption.

GIJN has shown the impact it can make around the world. OCCRP has its own impressive metrics showing the impact of its journalism on corruption: more than \$5.7 billion in assets frozen or seized by governments, more than 1 400 company closures, indictments and court decisions; 84 criminal investigations and government inquiries launched as a result of its stories; and the list goes on. This was one of the many factors that led to the current collaboration with OCCRP.

Despite TI’s research, the reality is that while an exposé can bring attention to an issue, raise the stakes and even be a catalyst for change, it is following it up with persistent advocacy, public mobilisation and other factors that most often leads to institutional change. However, the impact of journalism can easily be blunted by many other forces. The role that investigative journalism plays is part of a wider picture, which TI has compared to a complex machine with many interrelated parts: if one part isn’t functioning, it can throw the whole machine out of kilter, or stop it working altogether.

It is this relationship between what investigation can provide and the need to extend it to other organisations that led to the collaboration with TI. In fact, going back to my work at the BBC with the ICIJ on asbestos, the purpose of collaboration is the amplification of impact, whether between journalists or between journalists and campaigners. In a globalised world where reliable information is increasingly challenged, we could do more to raise our game and make greater impact. NGOs already provide a lot of research and expertise, analytical depth and case studies. They pick up cases when the journalists are finished, in effect creating a long tail to the story by advocating for change. This is at the heart of how they can improve impact.

Despite the blurring of lines that I have discussed, I remain convinced that there is a fundamental difference between journalists and NGO activists. Journalists shouldn’t be campaigners, and vice versa. They don’t need to be. But to be effective, neither side can be complacent, or draw lines that limit real cooperation. In order to protect and

enhance the important work of investigations done by civil society – whether by journalists, NGOs or academics who are under attack in many parts of the world, including in the US, and challenged by unprecedented levels and penetration of propaganda and false news – we need to experiment with new forms of collaboration.

Cooperation will be realised when there is more systematic sharing of evidence and data. Some of this data should also be made available to citizens, who can then use it to become informed about issues affecting them directly. Success in the future may well mean collaboration, because shining a light on the corrupt requires combing and synthesising multiple information streams; and this piecing together of the puzzle will only become more important and complex in the future, requiring a new quality of collaboration and joint action.

If journalists and activists and campaigners are going to work together, then some basic ground rules need to be established. For one, evidence should be fundamental for advocates and activists, as well as for journalists, if the starting point is a commitment to uncover and disseminate the truth.

Cooperation should be transparent, both between journalists and civil society, and with audiences and other constituencies about the nature and extent of that cooperation, as well as how the work is funded.

Cooperation depends on mutual independence – if collaboration was portrayed on a Venn diagram, the overlap between parties to a shared investigation would constitute a thin sliver; each has to have its own staff, and legal, security and risk support – and clear understanding of potential conflicts of interest.

In conclusion, it would be a mistake to believe that journalists and advocates or activists can remain unchanged by this cooperation – by understanding we’re in a battle, and we have to act politically (not politicise our work) on what we can unite around, despite our differences. ❖

*This is an edited extract of the chapter 'Investigative Journalism and Advocacy: Natural Allies?' by Anne Koch, from the book Global Teamwork: The Rise of Collaboration in Investigative Journalism edited by Richard Sambrook. It is made possible courtesy of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford. For the complete book, please go to <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/global-teamwork-rise-collaboration-investigative-journalism>*

# ∞ THE MOST MEANINGFUL IMPACT IS THROUGH COALITION

Mark Lee Hunter and Anton Harber, two of the foremost experts on media and how it intersects with civil society, sat down for a fireside chat recently to exchange thoughts, theories and ideas. They shared powerful insights into the role of the media, the role of civil society, and the role of social justice organisations – and into how, when co-operating in a transparent manner, they can have meaningful impact.

**MARK:** I'll start with a provocative comment, with Anton's permission. For me, civil society organisations, NGOs, et cetera, *are* media. They own their own media. Some of them actually have budgets. Some of them have capacity. In some cases, the NGOs actually did the work when journalists were not doing it. And that still continues today. If we consider the media and NGOs working together, on some kind of reform or accountability agenda, which I assume is the goal, then the audience-reach and capabilities of those organisations should be considered part of the asset base, on condition that there is some kind of guiding principle that brings people together. But this would assume at least some level of coordination; it's not going to be the sort of thing where journalists do what they do, and NGOs do what they do, and if by chance it comes together, then is that not wonderful? I think we're past that. So, that's my opening remark.

**ANTON:** One, let me say that Mark makes the point that it's not new; and in this part of the world, it is *not* new. Particularly in times of stress in the media, which has brought non-profits, governments and civil society together with journalists when they have a common purpose. But it can.

**MARK:** Anton, allow me to ask: is that how it worked during apartheid?

**ANTON:** Yes – it worked in a number of different ways. So sometimes... I will say this: sometimes, as journalists, when we were having trouble publishing something we knew – either just because of the law, or because we were... or our newspapers were threatened with closure, or our editors were –

**MARK:** – were threatened with jail?

**ANTON:** Yeah. Or were nervous about publishing it – we would take it to civil society, and say: "Look, if you can put this together into a report or if you can say this in a statement, it makes it easier for us to report it." So we had a number of options when we were under pressure. One of them was to take it to foreign correspondents. It was then printed overseas, and then became more publishable at home. But then, another [method] was working with human rights organisations, for example.



**DR MARK LEE HUNTER**

is a founding member of The Global Investigative Journalism Network, the principal author of *Story-Based Inquiry: A Manual for Investigative Journalists* (UNESCO 2009) and an adjunct professor and senior research fellow at the INSEAD Social Innovation Centre in Fontainebleau, France. He has taught and trained in 40 countries on five continents. Hunter's journalism earned him IRE, SDX, National Headliners, Clarion and H.L. Mencken Free Press Awards. In 2018, he pioneered investigative collaborations with NGOs in an eight-country investigation for Greenpeace. His scholarly work has been published widely. He is the author or co-author of *Modern Investigative Journalism: A Comprehensive Curriculum* (2019), *Power is Everywhere: How Stakeholder-driven Media Build the Future of Watchdog News* (2017), *The Hidden Scenario* and *The Story Tells the Facts*, among others.



**ANTON HARBER** is the Caxton Professor of Journalism (Adjunct) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He has a 35-year career in journalism, media management and training. He was founder-editor of the anti-apartheid newspaper the *Weekly Mail* (now the *Mail & Guardian*), Editor-in-Chief of South Africa's leading television news channel eNCA, and chief executive of Kagiso Broadcasting. He is convenor of judges for the Taco Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism and has served on multiple boards, and as a judge on the Sanlam Financial Journalism Awards, the Vodacom South African Journalism Awards and the CNN/Multichoice African Journalism Awards. Harber wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011) and *The Gorilla in the Room* (Mampoor Shorts, 2013). He co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/6), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010), and *Troublemakers: The Best of SA's Investigative Journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

## To me, that confirmed that under certain conditions, civil society organisations are in fact an alternate distribution network. They get to the people who care about the story.

I'll tell you a story about quite a strange cooperation between human rights organisations and ourselves at the *Weekly Mail*. During the state of emergency, in the 1980s, what happened was that the Detainees' Parents Support Committee – which was an organisation that gave support to people detained during the state of emergency – wanted to publish the full list of people detained, for obvious reasons: they wanted their names, the full extent of the list, the families' names. They wanted to know these people who had been identified, et cetera.

There was a tough legal issue; and the tough legal issue was that they came up with quite a tough imaginary legal opinion that said: 'If you do it in a certain way, we think you've got a defence if you're prosecuted.' It was saying that 'we will publish the names of confirmed detentions' – because, since they have been confirmed by the authorities, they [the authorities] had published those names.

So it was a bit of legal dancing around. But we were extremely vulnerable at the time, because we were threatened with closure. So this is what we agreed to do. It was like a triple step. It was like, "I'll tell you what: we will write about it in our paper this week that we are going to do it [publish] next week. I bet you one of the mainstream papers will do it to pre-empt us." And sure as hell, we found a way to publish a list of the detainees' names: "We're going to do it next Friday, when we publish our newspaper." And of course next Thursday, *The Star* – which was the big mainstream paper at the time – published it.

And we thought, "That's great, we got it out!" The NGO got it out, the journalists worked with them, and we even got the mainstream media to carry it out. So I think that was a particularly interesting dance we did with civil society, to get out important information.

**MARK:** It is particularly interesting. You know, one of the assumptions that – it's embedded in that story, if I'm not mistaken – is that the story was more important than the credit you got for it.

**ANTON:** Yes – under those conditions, the important thing is to get it out, and that is what matters.

**MARK:** You know... I'm not comparing what I have to live with to the apartheid era. But I will say that in 2018, I did an investigation with

Greenpeace – Greenpeace sponsored it. It was about agricultural pollution. And we were going to publish in eight countries. And I knew that no mainstream media in France would touch the story. Greenpeace is considered an enemy of the French state, because they are anti-nuclear, and there is a long history – that includes assassination. I never believed for a moment that we were going to see this [investigation] in *Le Monde*, or *Le Figaro*. They would say, "Greenpeace? They are an activist group. Suspect." Or whatever. Regardless of how good or bad the investigation was. I think it was pretty good, but... you know, I'm biased. I wrote it!

So the Greenpeace people were saying, "We are going to pitch this," and I was saying to myself (I didn't say it to them!), "No way." But I didn't care about that, because Greenpeace has 70 million social media followers and three million paying members, and I said to myself: "They are a news network." And that's one of the reasons I wanted to work with them in the first place. And I thought, you know, if they publish it, the story gets out. And what happened was, the report was downloaded 150 000 times in France – which is more than the circulation of all but *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*.

And a mass of environmental news websites in France picked up the story, and the farmers attacked it, which meant more people were hearing about it. To me, that confirmed that under certain conditions, civil society organisations are in fact an alternate distribution network. They get to the people who care about the story. They don't persuade people on the other side of the aisle to jump in; but they do represent an alternative channel that, if it's properly set up (Greenpeace had already done that), then it's not a problem, if the issue is getting the story out rather than getting credited in *Le Monde*. Which I don't give a shit about, being credited in *Le Monde*; I was concerned about having the investigation out.

**ANTON:** But Mark, let me ask you this question: do you find, in your experience, that it opens one up to a charge of partisanship?

**MARK:** Yeah. Sure. But that's the audiences' expectations these days. And not only in the United States, where we see that tendency

carried through to a really dramatic level, where I think the latest information is that 70 per cent of the people who watch *Fox News* think that [Donald] Trump won the election. I mean, my God! There are information silos and information bubbles. And the digital news report by Rasmus Kleis Nielsen at Oxford documented the growing partisan nature of the public.

**ANTON:** I agree with you. I suppose one is... just being aware, and conscious of that limitation. But what it also tells me is that it's critical to be transparent about that relationship, and the purpose and the nature of that relationship – is it not?

**MARK:** Yeah, I agree absolutely. And by the way, for me that ties into a larger trend, which is that our 20th-century stance in the news business was that we were going to be objective; we present the facts, and the public makes up its minds. I'm not going to diss the intrinsic merits of that position – I find it very noble, in many ways. I'm not convinced that it corresponds to contemporary reality. For the reasons we have evoked previously, but also because, you know, for many years – and I know you've heard this too, Anton – for many years, people in our classes, on the streets, in dinner conversations, would say, "Oh, nobody can be objective!" And we always thought, "Well, what do they know?"

Well, maybe they were right. Maybe they were expressing something, in a relatively inarticulate way, that actually makes some sense. Now for me, objectivity resides in verifiable facts. Facts that will be established by any person of good faith. Not everyone is of good faith. But if you and I are standing at the crossroads and a tank comes by, it's going someplace, and something is going to happen when it gets to that place – those are facts. And if somebody says, "What tank?," then either they weren't paying attention, or they're lying. So that level of objectivity is there and is always going to be important. Reality counts.

But what is increasingly taking its place is transparency. *This is who we are. This is what we want. This is what we are prepared to do to get it.* I don't mind working with those people, to the extent that I know who they are, what they want, and what they are prepared to do to get it. Due diligence, if you will. I have no

problem with that at all: this is what we stand for. This is the community we defend. I think the idea of defending a community is very central. And I would be astonished if you differ with that point, given your history.

**ANTON:** I don't differ at all. To respond to what you've said, 'objectivity' is a word I try not to use, because –

**MARK:** What makes you say that?

**ANTON:** It's no longer valuable, in my teaching and my discussion about these things. It's one of those phrases, I guess, like 'fake news,' that is better not used; because they are so used and abused that they are no longer particularly useful. I would much rather talk about accuracy, balance, fairness and honesty. And transparency. I think there is a growing demand among journalists to be fully transparent about their interests, their involvements, their history, their biases, and whatever partisanship there might be in what they do. I think that is incredibly important.

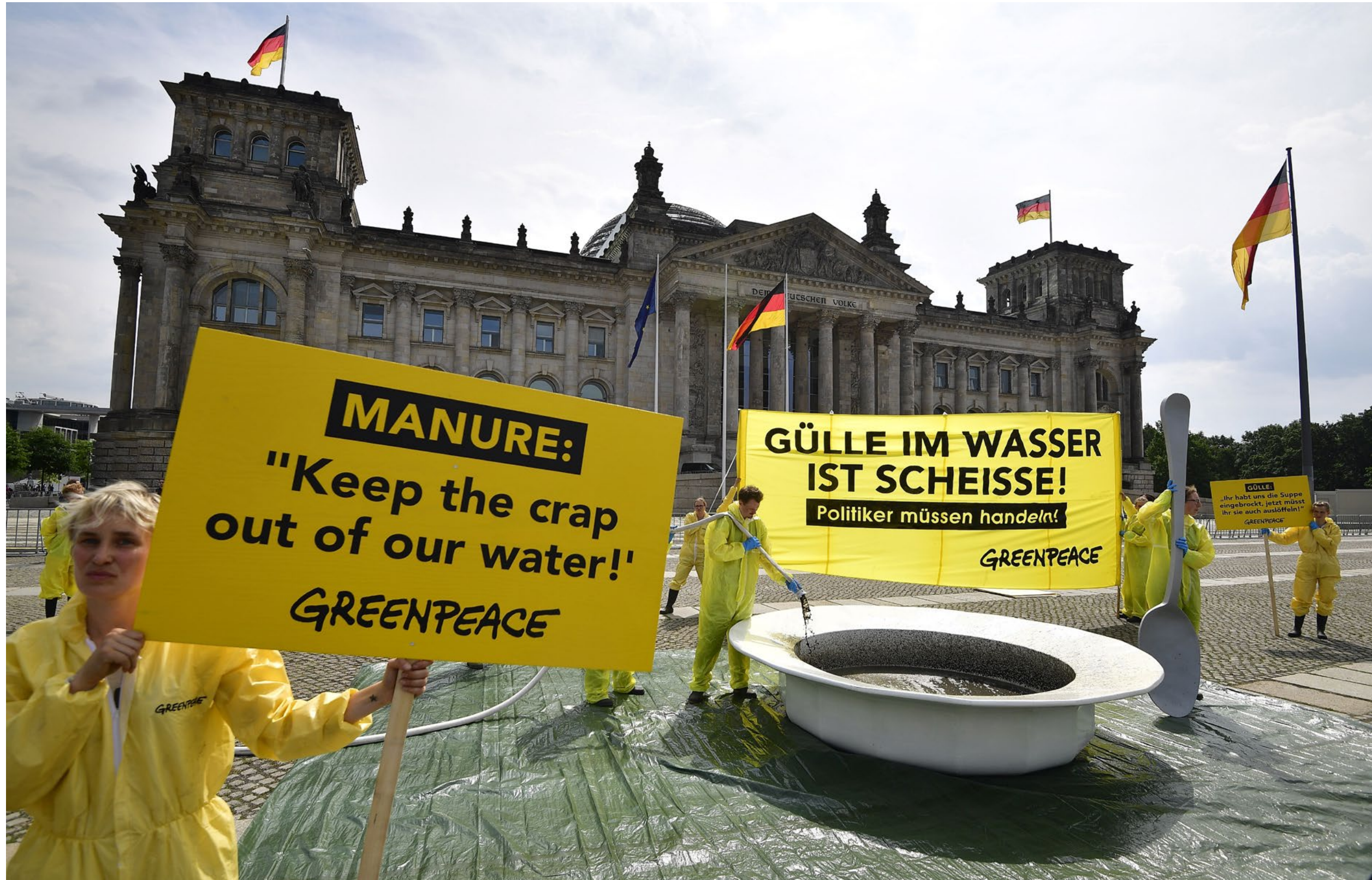
Honesty is an incredibly important issue. Let me put it to you as a question. (And I say 'honesty' in the sense that sometimes, if you're a journalist trying to make point A and you come across a fact which contradicts that point, you have an obligation as a journalist, I think, to deal with that fact – not to dismiss it or hide it.) Does a civil society advocacy organisation have the same ideal, or is there a potential contradiction there? And I say that because I know of experiences where a civil society organisation – or a lawyer one is working with – where you both know something which does not serve your case; and they are tempted to argue, "Let us avoid it – let us put it aside."

I do know of occasions where the question of what I am saying – honesty, or openness, or transparency – can conflict with a civil society organisation. If they do not have –

**MARK:** With news organisations, too.

**ANTON:** That is true. But it is clear to me that if you're a journalist, and you know a fact that you're uncomfortable with, you cannot ignore it. You have to deal with it. You cannot hide it.

**MARK:** Well, actually, you *don't* have to deal with it; you can hide it. People in news organisations – certain news organisations – do that all the time. I don't think you have had a



LEFT: Greenpeace activists demonstrate with a bowl of liquid manure and banners reading "Manure in the water is shit!" and "Keep the crap out of our water!" in front of the Reichstag building housing the Bundestag in Berlin on June 21, 2018.

BELOW: President Richard M. Nixon announces his resignation on television in Washington, D.C.

BOTTOM LEFT: The book Journalism of Outrage penned by David L. Protes et al.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Julian Assange of WikiLeaks fame speaks to reporters on July 26, 2010 in London, England.

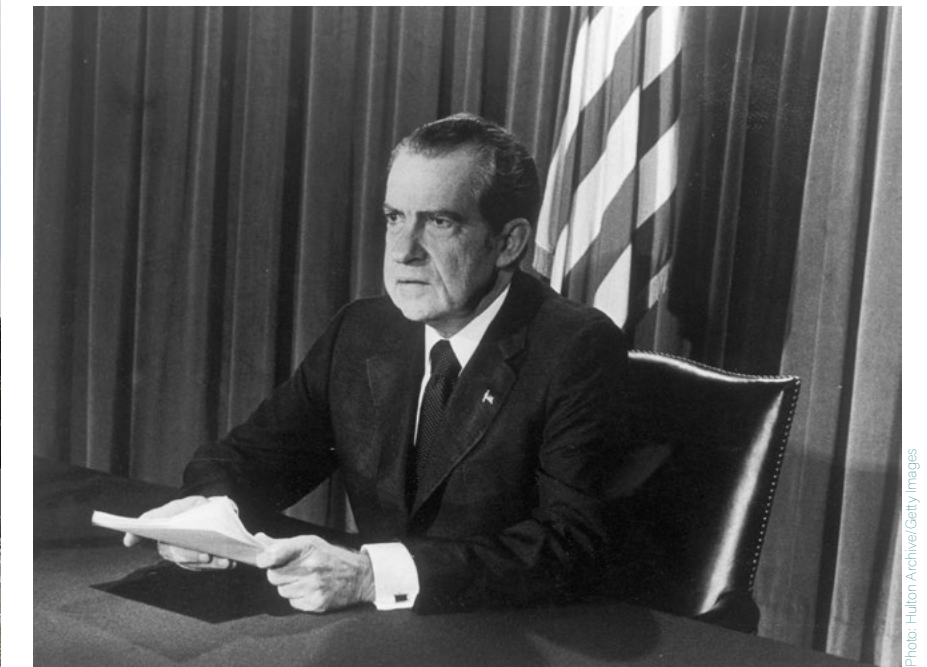
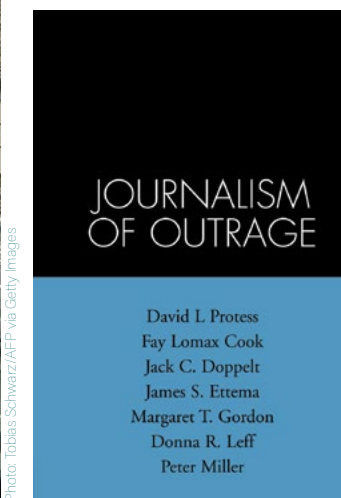


Photo: Hulton Archive/Getty Images



JOURNALISM OF OUTRAGE

David L. Protes  
Fay Lomax Cook  
Jack C. Doppelt  
James S. Ettema  
Margaret T. Gordon  
Donna R. Leff  
Peter Miller



Photo: Peter Macdiarmid/Getty Images



I would much rather talk about accuracy, balance, fairness and honesty. And transparency. I think there is a growing demand among journalists to be fully transparent about their interests, their involvements, their history, their biases, and whatever partisanship there might be in what they do. I think that is incredibly important.

lot of luxury in your career, in terms of freedom; but I do think you have had that luxury.

The luxury of being honest, even if you had a fight about it with CSOs and, I am sure, the African National Congress, and all that...

**ANTON:** Yes, I think you're right. I suppose I come from a position where I say, in an oppressed society – as we had until 1994 – the rules and the ethics are different. In an open society, I think we re-assert more strongly a set of journalistic ethics, based on –

**MARK:** Well, I hope we do. I cannot say that, based on what I see at Fox [*Fox News*] and its competitors on the right in *Breitbart*. There are things they [*Breitbart*] do not deal with. There are things they just sweep away. This is a major dividing line in ethical journalism right now. Now; do civil society organisations lie, do they conceal information? I have not had that experience with Greenpeace. Never. They ask this for stuff we could not do, but that is for something else. Those things did not include lying, they included documenting problems where we could not get the data. And when we put it to them that way, they said, "Okay, you cannot get the data; we do not do it." They are evidence-based; not everyone is.

So that requirement to accept facts whether you like them or not is central to what we are talking about. And honestly, if you cannot agree on that with a civil society organisation, you are talking to the wrong people, in my view. It doesn't matter how many members they have, or how much money they have; you are going to have a problem. Because sooner or later, you're going to say, "This is what it is", and they are going to say, "Well, that is not what we want it to be – change your story." I don't see why anyone who respects themselves would put up with that crap.

**ANTON:** So, you're saying there has to be a synergy of value between the journalist and the civil society organisation...?

**MARK:** Well, you're taking it up a level of abstraction and I agree. I'll make it more specific: the key value has to be that reality comes first, *period*. Whether or not you like what the reality is. You do not hide facts that have a material effect on your community. That is treachery. It is taking them for fools, it

is playing with their futures. Then, with their security. How dare you? How would anyone do that? I am not saying *you* ever did that, Anton. I know very well you did not. But, you know... there are people who do. And they call themselves journalists. Which is like a jackal calling itself a lion.

**ANTON:** Right. Right.

**MARK:** And I suppose there are civil society organisations that do the same. I know of a couple on the right, there is James O'Keefe, there is David Daleiden, who leave out the part of the story that doesn't suit their agendas, and who publish stuff that ruins peoples' lives. They are punishment organisations. They are not truth seekers. This is part of the landscape. But it's not the people that I would choose to work with – or you, or the people in The CHARM Initiative. At least, I hope so.

**ANTON:** Well, one experience I have had is that within our journalism department at Wits University, we have a project that brings together civil society and journalists, called the Wits Justice Project. It focuses on exposing and tackling problems in the justice system, particularly people wrongly imprisoned. We created that project precisely because we saw the power of civil society lawyers and journalists combining to tackle social problems. We wanted to demonstrate it working with our students.

Interesting example. A couple of years ago, the Wits Justice Project produced a major story, about a person who had managed to get out of prison after 17 years who had been wrongly imprisoned from day one. It was a great story, and he was a very interesting guy. The *Guardian* in London were about to run the story when they realised the Wits Justice Project were an advocacy organisation – and they declined it. And we were surprised, because we thought the *Guardian* would get this relationship; and naturally, we were transparent with them in the initial product of the Wits Justice Project, which brought these interests together, and we thought it was fine as long as we were transparent about that. But they declined what was in fact a very good story, that in every other respect they were ready to run.

**MARK:** Well you know, to me, these situations... you know, we always frame these things in terms of ethics, in the purity of our ethics. To me, the underlying question is about value

propositions. It is about the economics. If what you are selling to people is a certain concept of independence, including neutrality towards the outcome of stories, then you find yourself having to make that kind of decision. I had to deal with a situation like that as well. It was on a transnational project that I worked on the year before I went to work with Greenpeace. And in fact, it was the trigger that made me say, "I have got to go and work with Greenpeace, or someone like Greenpeace."

It was an investigation on the European parliament which did not start with a clear hypothesis. It started as a data collection project. We were trying to see how people in the European parliament spent an allowance they had – a significant piece of money, for me, 4 300 euros a month – on their national offices. So we compiled all this data... we didn't really know what we were looking for, it was not the best project I'd worked on. We realised that a third of these deputies *had* no offices. They were just taking the money. They could not spend it on an office, because they did not have an office.

So we got that story out in 28 countries; and then, civil society organisations – notably Transparency International – came to us and said, "We really want your data." And the other journalists on the project said, "Oh, no – that's *our* data." I thought, "Well, actually, that is our work product – the *data* is public." But then I challenged this position, and I was told, "We are not activists."

And I thought, "We *aren't* activists." So why are we doing this story? Are we doing this story to say, "Oh, you have been bad – you've taken the European Union taxpayers' money."? [Or] are we doing this story because we want it to stop? If we want it to stop, we have to work with someone who has the lobbying and organising capacity that we lack, and that will make something stop. That was my point of view on the thing. I was not working on that story to say, "Oh, what a cool project." I was working on the story because I wanted something to stop.

And when that divide became clear in the group, I was in the minority position. Which is what I seemed to be fairly comfortable in, but... I was in the minority position. I said: "Okay, fine – you do it your way. Next time out of the

## Even if you look at the Watergate case, there was a de facto coalition. It wasn't the *Washington Post* that brought down Nixon; it was a de facto coalition of powerful social forces, of government institutions...

box, I'm working with someone who is set up to change." I am not going to pretend that simply because I say something in a newspaper one day, it emits a flood of other information [that means] something is going to happen. And by the way, that view of how investigative journalism obtains results was directly challenged in a book by David L. Protess et al. that I'm sure you know, Anton – it's *The Journalism of Outrage*.

**ANTON:** Yes, an important book.

**MARK:** Probably the greatest single work in the history of agenda-setting studies, okay? The single greatest work. Okay; if you look at the co-authors, they are all the heavyweights in that field. They knew exactly the importance of what they were doing. And I find it astonishing that the journalism business largely ignored that book. Okay, I mean, I never see references to it (except in my own writings). I never hear it come up in a discussion. When I mention it to people, they've never heard of it.

So, for the basis of the recording, I will simply say that what Protess and his people did was to look at six investigations that led to results. And they discovered that in every case, behind the scenes, behind the publication, the journalists were forming coalitions with people – with civil society groups, with activists' lawyers, legislators, prosecutors – to get something done. And I mean, they didn't broadcast it, they didn't say they were doing it; but they did it. And they got the results.

If you look at different pieces from the history of investigative journalism... Clark R. Mollenhoff – who, you know, was a great reporter – began his career in Iowa City; and in his memoirs, he discusses how that [Iowa City] was one of the most corrupt, crime-ridden cities he'd ever seen. And to bring it down, he formed an alliance with a prosecutor, an honest cop and a newspaper. And they chased the crooks out of town. Or put them in jail. I mean, you know, to me this should be Journalism 101.

Even if you look at the Watergate case, there was a de facto coalition. It wasn't the *Washington Post* that brought down Nixon; it was a de facto coalition of powerful social forces, of government institutions... notably the judiciary and the FBI. These guys opened

the door and kept the heat on. I'm not dissing their [the *Washington Post's*] work; they did a great job. They did an important job, a historic job. But to pretend they brought down the president of the United States all on their lonesome is grotesque. And you know, I've talked about this with Gerard Ryle, who I actually exchanged emails with because I was going to say something in a book about how I see IJ [investigative journalism] work. And I said, "They didn't just depend on public outrage. They had lined up allies who were going to put the message forward after the story came out." And Gerard said, "Yes – that is exactly what we do."

I'll return to the initial point, okay? If your value proposition is, "We are neutral, and we are hands-off," then of course you're going to have a different point of view on whether or not you should be taking more or less [of an] activist-reformist role.

And another side riff is – excuse me for that – historically, that is not what the news media did. They went on crusades. News organisations were crusading organisations as well, it was one of their roles. We have gotten away from that. Okay, fine; somebody else took on that role, and they are called civil society organisations. But if what we're selling is neutrality, and we don't care about what we actually achieve, that is one business model. There is value in that for a lot of people. It's one of the key values that is left to heritage news organisations – great.

But there is another standpoint that says, "We are in the game to change the world." Or as Karl Marx said – with resonance even for a non-Marxist like myself – "The point is not to understand the world, but to change it." If that is the value proposition, then you *have* to have allies. There is no other way you're going to get anything done. The single most important insight in *The Journalism of Outrage* is that a lone journalist is a loser. They always lose.

And even in the contemporary era... if you look at Andrew Jennings – the extraordinary figure who brought down FIFA – Andrew set up a worldwide coalition: of other media, of law enforcement, of civil society groups. How shall I put it... he was not exactly running an army, but he was accompanied by a growing cohort of other forces who could keep up the pressure on FIFA. If he had not had that, he would have been

painted as a lunatic, screaming in his corner. Andrew was not a lunatic – he does scream sometimes, but he is certainly not a lunatic! And he inspired this movement. And that is how he won – with the help of the FBI, who eventually noticed what he was doing, came to him and said: "Do you have any information that might be of interest to us?!" And Andrew said, "Only about 30 years' worth..."

**ANTON:** No, you're making a very important point. Certainly in our experience, as David Protess illustrated in his work, in his book, the combination for me of journalists, civil society and lawyers are a special change –

**MARK:** Yeah, that's very insightful, and absolutely true.

**ANTON:** If we say, "The starting point is a positive one. What is the best way in which we can drive social change on a particular issue?" To me, we can demonstrate very clearly that it is that combination.

**MARK:** Yes. No question.

**ANTON:** And then it becomes a question of managing the relationship between them. Because they're working for the same goal, but they have different methods, and different approaches. And sometimes on detail, conflicting tactical issues – not broad strategic aims, but tactical issues. And you have to manage that relationship to their mutual benefit. It may mean the journalist waits to publish when it serves the other tactically. For example –

**MARK:** It may mean that publication is co-ordinated to the launch of an NGO campaign.

**ANTON:** Correct. Correct. If your starting point is social change, then those are the pacts you make to harness those forces which together are incredibly powerful forces for social change.

**MARK:** They are certainly a lot more powerful than media by itself.

**ANTON:** Exactly.

**MARK:** Yeah. Yeah. So, these tactical things... this brings us back to the issue of due diligence: can you actually trust the motives of the people you are working with? Are they going to play by the same rules and same interpretation of the values you are talking

about? If that is not the case... I've never been involved in a situation where members of a coalition betrayed each other around an investigation, but I am sure it could happen; or maybe, someone is not going to want to listen to the lawyers – "Screw you, I'm braver than them..."

**ANTON:** Yeah.

**MARK:** ...you know, maybe they're not going to listen to sense. You know? I mean, I happen to be one of the people who thinks Julian Assange made a historic contribution to our profession. And I have to say that I think he would have been in a better position if he'd spent more time holding his coalition together, instead of constantly getting out in front of them and presenting them with faits accomplis.

**ANTON:** Yes, it was a major setback for everyone when his relationship – with the media, for example – broke down. With his media partners.

**MARK:** Yeah... I don't think he's entirely to blame for that. But, you know... honestly, you know, I'm on the record as saying, "I think he was betrayed." I could be wrong about that, I don't know what pressures *The Guardian* were subjected to – except from a distance; they looked hellacious from a distance. But yeah; that relationship broke down, his relationship with his funders and protectors broke down, you know, he lost lawyers as he went along. All of this stuff was... you know, it was consistent with his character and his values. Which I wouldn't call extreme, but I would certainly say were... I don't know, it's hard for me to think of a compliment to return. Maybe 'extreme transparency'.

**ANTON:** Radical?

**MARK:** We can call it 'radical transparency', if you will. But you know, it's one thing to be radical, and it's another thing to think about the practicalities of ensuring that you don't end up alone. 🗨️



# A UNIQUE MODEL OF PUBLIC INTEREST HEALTH JOURNALISM

Marcus Low argues that it is entirely possible for a media service to align closely with advocacy organisations, as *Spotlight* does; and that it can lead to demonstrable benefits and quality improvements, while maintaining journalism principles and integrity.

Editorial independence and transparency are key to managing close links with civil society. South Africa faces extreme health challenges. Around 13% of the population are living with HIV; every year, an estimated 360 000 people fall ill with tuberculosis (TB); and rates of diabetes, heart disease and some cancers are on the increase.

The country is also deeply unequal, in that over 80% of people are dependent on an often dysfunctional public healthcare system – less than 20% have access to the much better-resourced private healthcare sector. In such a severely unequal society, those with enough money to pay for private healthcare are also more likely to be in a position to pay for media.

The economic incentives are thus not particularly strong for for-profit media to cover health issues that affect mostly poor people. Add the fact that newsrooms in the country have shrunk – some have disappeared altogether – and that the economic model that has sustained journalism for most of the last century is in crisis, and the outlook for public-interest health journalism is bleak.

Whatever the reasons may be, over the last decade our perception has been that many important public interest health issues are insufficiently covered in mainstream media. This is the gap that *Spotlight* sets out to fill. Filling this gap is critically important for accountability in the healthcare system, and for the health of our democracy.

'Filling the gap' has at times meant doing investigative journalism (as with *Spotlight's* impactful Health4Sale series on corruption in four provincial departments of health). Often it has meant reporting on why a new TB prevention medicine is not yet available in the public healthcare system, or why government has failed to publish important new health data. It has meant creating the space for experts to write opinion pieces on critical issues in the healthcare system, and making the latest HIV, TB and Covid-19 science accessible to the general public. At times it has meant turning HIV data into accessible data visualisations, and helping readers get a more accurate picture of the state of our various epidemics.


In some respects *Spotlight* is typical of early 21st-century donor-funded public interest journalism. It is a small operation, with few staff. It receives its funding from just a few international donors. Articles are published under open Creative Commons licences, and payment-free re-publication in mainstream media is encouraged. There is no paywall, and no economic incentive beyond maintaining donor funding. The mandate is clear and simple – produce compelling, in-depth public interest health journalism, and get it read as widely as possible.

**spotlight**



Marcus Low is the Editor of *Spotlight*, published by SECTION27 (a public-interest law centre) and the Treatment Action Campaign (an HIV advocacy organisation). *Spotlight* produces compelling, in-depth public-interest health journalism, and distributes it as widely as possible.

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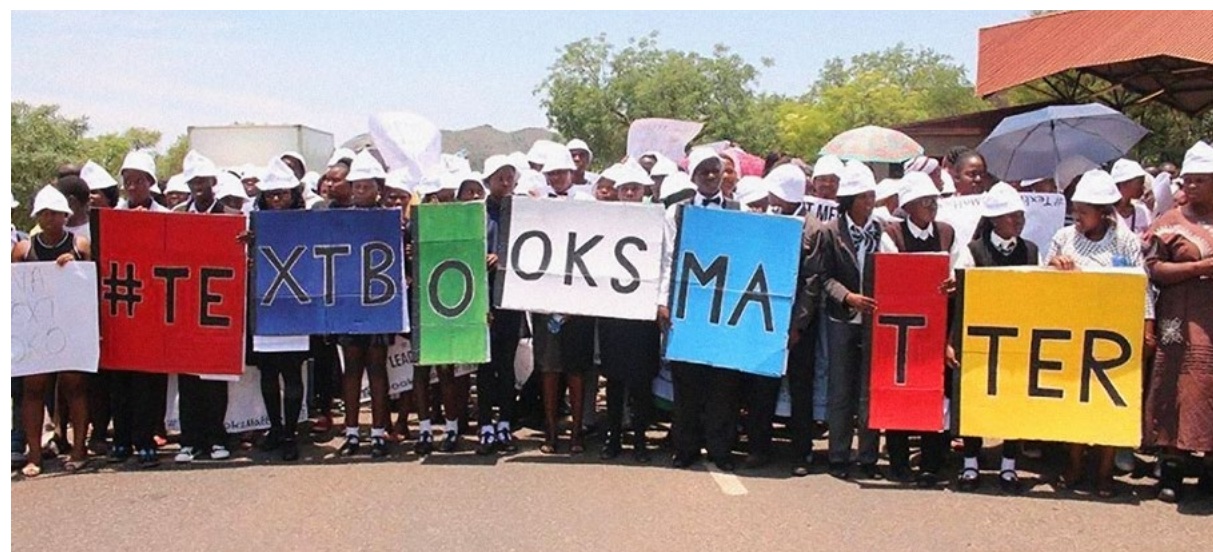


### Why broadly neutralising antibodies might be the next big thing in HIV

February 8, 2021

We know antiretroviral therapy can prevent HIV infection, but can natural biological substances do the same? The results of a recent scientific trial have answered this question: Yes, using broadly neutralising antibodies. But what are broadly neutralising antibodies? How do they work? And when will the average person get access to them? Amy Green breaks down the science.

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*ABOVE: Learners protest in Limpopo, South Africa against the fact that many school children do not receive their full complement of textbooks by the time the school year starts. They held a protest in Bisho to make their voices heard. The advocacy was led by SECTION27 and Basic Education For All (BEFA).*

*RIGHT: In this file photo, then legal researcher at SECTION27, Mluleki Marongo interviews a resident in an Eastern Cape village in South Africa on poor access to ambulances. Most residents do not bother calling ambulances as they do not arrive.*

*FAR RIGHT: Families of the Life Esidimeni disaster listen to evidence being led at the Alternative Dispute Resolution. It emerged that more than 144 Mental Health Care Users had died when facilities were closed down by the provincial government. Many went missing and over 1,250 were affected. SECTION27 led much of the advocacy on this case.*



**Spotlight shows that high journalistic principles and journalistic integrity can successfully be maintained in a context where there are close links to advocacy organisations – provided that strict internal and external journalistic rules and checks and balances are put in place. Of the various measures discussed here, the codifying of editorial independence is probably the most important.**

In 2020, *Spotlight* produced over 250 original articles, over 200 of which were republished on popular South African mainstream websites such as News24, Daily Maverick and AllAfrica – reaching millions of readers in the process.

While typical of donor-funded journalism in some respects, *Spotlight* is unique in other areas. Most notably, it provides an example of how high journalistic standards can be maintained in a context of close links with advocacy organisations – *Spotlight* is published by SECTION27 (a public interest law centre) and the Treatment Action Campaign (an HIV advocacy organisation).

The first critical element to making such a relationship with advocacy organisations work is the fact that *Spotlight* has been given complete editorial independence – an independence that the editors guard jealously. This is to say that much as the editorial teams of most newspapers are structurally shielded from the newspaper's publishers, *Spotlight* too is structurally shielded from its publishers, which happen to be two NGOs rather than a trust or a large media company. As in any media organisation, having such a firewall between the editorial team and the publisher is critical to avoid the perception – and the actual risk – of a publication becoming a mouthpiece for its owners.

The second critical element to managing this relationship is maximum transparency to readers. Whenever SECTION27 or the Treatment Action Campaign are mentioned in a *Spotlight* article, a note is added to the article disclosing the connection. Again, this is much the same as what happens when a newspaper reports on its parent company and discloses that connection.

While they are essential, internal measures such as the above, and clearly distinguishing reporting from editorial content, are not sufficient on their own, and should ideally be balanced by external checks and balances. That is why *Spotlight* is also a member of the South African Press Council, and therefore subject to the country's system of media self-regulation. In essence, this means that *Spotlight* has undertaken to abide by the South African Press Code, and the adjudication processes associated with the code. Among other consequences, this means that *Spotlight* could be ordered to publish apologies or retractions, should rulings be made against it by South Africa's Press Ombud.

Of course, even if all of the steps above are taken, public trust and a reputation for credible journalism

are things that must be earned, and things that take time to establish. It is by reading a publication's work over time that the public, and people in the media or health sectors, form views on the credibility of that publication. A recent independent evaluation of *Spotlight's* work suggests that since its launch in mid-2016, it has succeeded on this front – a view that is supported by the willingness of leading mainstream media partners to republish *Spotlight's* work. In short, journalistic credibility and editorial independence have both been established, and been seen to be established.

As an aside, additional context worth noting is that both SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign also have public-interest mandates, and that these mandates are broadly aligned with those of public interest journalism. In this sense, the potential conflicts of interest that have to be managed are not as many or as serious as they would be, had *Spotlight's* publishers been for-profit private companies active in the healthcare sector.

### Benefiting from civil society networks

Provided that relationships are appropriately managed from a journalistic perspective, as described above, *Spotlight's* links with advocacy organisations also provide unique benefits. Perhaps most usefully, *Spotlight* benefits from the rich network of individual and organisational contacts that SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign have across South Africa's nine provinces.

The Treatment Action Campaign, for example, has a network of around 200 branches across the country – most of which have adopted local healthcare facilities to monitor, and who have invaluable local know-how. Being linked to such networks gives *Spotlight* unique access to the coalface of healthcare service delivery in South Africa, and has assisted in *Spotlight* being able to produce high-quality on-the-ground reporting.

These various networks, in addition to the deep institutional memory of these organisations, also meant that when Covid-19 struck South Africa in March 2020, *Spotlight* was well-positioned and ready for it. There were pre-existing links with community healthcare worker groups that made it easier to cover this group of people's need for personal protective equipment than it would have been without these links.

Similarly, there were years of experience monitoring the performance of the National Health Laboratory Service, something which would turn out to provide invaluable background when the country struggled to keep up with Covid-19 testing demand. And of course, there were long-established relationships with many researchers and clinicians across the country – relationships built on years working on HIV, TB and public healthcare services more generally.

Of course, from a journalistic perspective there is a risk that this kind of special access to existing networks could lead to bias. However, this risk can easily be managed – in the first place, by recognising that the risk exists; but also by making explicit efforts to cultivate alternative sources, and by strictly upholding core journalistic principles such as fairness, the right to reply, transparency, and editorial independence. It also helps, in this regard, that *Spotlight* works with a variety of freelance journalists from a diverse set of backgrounds and with varying levels of experience – these freelancers being yet a further step removed from *Spotlight's* links with advocacy organisations.

Coming from journalism backgrounds, the *Spotlight* editors are also keenly aware that readers will judge *Spotlight* harshly for any whiff of bias in the publication's reporting. Accordingly, avoiding bias in *Spotlight's* reporting has been a top priority for its editors from day one.

To summarise: *Spotlight* shows that high journalistic principles and journalistic integrity can successfully be maintained in a context where there are close links to advocacy organisations – provided that strict internal and external journalistic rules and checks and balances are put in place. Of the various measures discussed here, the codifying of editorial independence is probably the most important.

### The history behind Spotlight

From the early 2000s to 2012 (when funding for it dried up) the Treatment Action Campaign published a magazine called *Equal Treatment*. The magazine, often translated into four different languages, explained in an accessible manner the science of HIV and TB, and people's rights in the healthcare system, and was used as a form of mass education and empowerment within the Treatment Action Campaign and partner organisations. At

its peak it was published five times per year, with 70 000 copies printed of each edition.

In 2011 SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign launched a second publication, called the *NSP Review*. The focus of the *NSP Review* was on monitoring South Africa's HIV and TB response, rather than the specific type of mass education aimed for in *Equal Treatment*. In time, however, it was recognised that the *NSP Review's* reach was somewhat limited – partly because it was explicitly an NGO publication. For this reason the *NSP Review* was shut down early in 2016, and a decision was made to launch *Spotlight*.

From the beginning, the idea behind *Spotlight* was to create a journalistic entity that is editorially independent from SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign. It thus represented a move away from NGO publications such as the *NSP Review* and *Equal Treatment*, to a more traditional journalistic entity that plays by the accepted rules of journalism and fully subjects itself to the South African Press Code.

In order to make this move, key leaders at SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign had to be convinced that relinquishing control (by agreeing to full editorial independence for *Spotlight*) was a necessary step to ensuring that people would take *Spotlight* more seriously than they did the *NSP Review*. Of course, people from SECTION27 and the Treatment Action Campaign could still have opinion pieces published in *Spotlight*; but these would be clearly marked as 'comment and analysis', and opinion pieces from people at these two organisations would get no special treatment compared to anyone from other organisations.

Behind this shift was a growing realisation and consensus that public health issues in South Africa were not being covered sufficiently by existing mainstream media, and that this shortcoming could only be addressed by increasing media capacity. That is to say, there was a recognition that supporting the expansion of independent public interest journalism capacity would result in systemic benefits that would assist all efforts to improve access to quality healthcare, be they from government, advocacy organisations, service delivery NGOs, multinational health agencies, or international donors. It would both increase health sector accountability, and deepen public understanding of health issues – in short, it would serve the public interest. **✎**

# WHAT'S NEXT?

This anthology has been produced as part of the Consortium to Promote Human Rights, Civic Freedoms and Media Development (CHARM) Africa project and its ongoing work to protect and expand the space for civil society organisations and human rights defenders in the region, with more emphasis on frontline actors working on issues related to gender, labour, LGBTQI+, and environmental and indigenous rights.

The project is implemented by a consortium of six regional partners: CIVICUS, Civil Rights Defenders, Defend Defenders, Fojo Media Institute, Hub Afrique, and Wits Journalism; committed to working together towards the realisation of a free and vibrant media and civil society in sub-Saharan Africa.

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[www.peoplepowertruth.africa](http://www.peoplepowertruth.africa)

Contact: [sofie.gullberg@lnu.se](mailto:sofie.gullberg@lnu.se)

