



INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH



OCTOBER  
2023

BRIEFING PAPER

## DARK CLOUDS, SILVER LININGS: MEDIA VIABILITY AND GROWTH IN NAMIBIA



BY DIETRICH REMMERT



# **DARK CLOUDS, SILVER LININGS: MEDIA VIABILITY AND GROWTH IN NAMIBIA**

## **1. Introduction & Scope of this Report**

The news media industry has undergone a profound transformation over the past two decades or so. Much of this has been due to technological changes and the rise of the internet. Long gone are the days where people leisurely paged through printed newspapers or tuned into lunchtime FM radio to hear the latest news bulletin.

The aim of this report is to provide a situational analysis of the state of Namibia's legacy media under the central theme of financial sustainability. In essence, the study seeks to update and expand on work published at the start of 2019 titled: "Namibia's Media: Facing the Digital Challenge" by the Namibian Media Trust (NMT) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR).

This report will assume a similar focus to the 2019 NMT/IPPR study by closely assessing the challenges and opportunities facing Namibia's traditional media houses in light of the ongoing phenomenon of digitalisation and associated disruptions in marketing and advertising fields, journalism and preferences of media consumers, with particular emphasis on print media and to a lesser extent, broadcasters. In addition, the study will review and detail efforts undertaken by media houses to adjust their business models, offer novel media products and establish new revenue streams.

This paper aims to broadly sketch out the current situation of legacy media primarily from a business perspective and to highlight critical challenges as well as noteworthy developments and promising strategies. While the future of independent journalism and the media business model that underpins it remains in flux, Namibian media houses are demonstrating their resilience and increasing willingness to embrace new products, services, and operational formats.

## **2. Methodology & Limitations**

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The study is of an exploratory nature relying primarily on experiences and opinions derived from in-depth interviews with local media house representatives and people with extensive knowledge about local media operations. Digitalisation, media viability, and press freedom are themes with a global scope and breadth. Thus, this research makes use of and reflects on international, regional, and country-specific information, studies and reports on the subject matter. The author conducted a total of eight interviews (See Table 1 at the end of the report) followed by a period of comprehensive desk research to round out the data collection phase of the study. The former method utilised a semi-structured interview process guided by a rough questionnaire. The bulk of the interviews and desk research was carried out in mid-2022.

Media and communication studies is a vast field which is split among a multitude of subfields and academic disciplines. The author therefore prioritised the search and review of information on media business, operations, and viability under the aspect of digitalisation, news media and media in Africa and developing nations. Current global trend reports on media by international government and media institutions as well as industry groups rounded out the analysis.

It should be noted that while journalism is inseparably linked to media production, it is not the focus of the report, neither are media houses centred on entertainment and leisure. Rather media concerned with current events and news coverage and other issues of public interest is prioritised given its importance to press freedom. Over recent years, the level of information on Africa's media environment has improved. Nevertheless, trustworthy quantitative data remains elusive. Studies characterising the shifting business environment for legacy media houses in Africa are increasingly available but tend to focus on examples from the Western world.<sup>1</sup> Media research in Africa often focuses on issues around press freedom, journalism and decolonisation – arguably to the detriment of issues like the sustainable financing of journalism and media viability.<sup>2</sup>

CEOs and editors interviewed as part of this study were candid about industry challenges, but understandably reluctant to divulge financial details of their respective operations. Thus, this study cannot comment accurately on the overall financial health of Namibia's legacy media industry.

<sup>1</sup> Krüger, Franz. Disrupted media - disrupted academy: Rethinking African J-schools. Discussion paper. Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School. February 2022. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Cheruiyot, David. "The (Other) Anglophone Problem: Charting the Development of a Journalism Subfield." In African Journalism Studies. July 2021, Vol. 42, No. 2, 94 – 105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2021.1939750>

Finally, one notable limitation of this study is that the vast majority of interviewees were males. Efforts were undertaken to address this which did however not succeed. Unfortunately, it is evident that Namibia's media still has some way to go in terms achieving adequate gender balance – an issue that resonates globally.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Digitalisation: Threat to Media Sustainability & Media Freedom

The conversion of information into digital formats that can be speedily accessed across the globe by increasingly cheap and accessible gadgets such as smartphones has been termed the 'digital revolution'. This process has been transformational in ushering in rapid and profound changes across many industries from healthcare to agriculture and education and has impacted society as a whole. Indeed, digitalisation has reshaped the way we interact, work, consume, create and live in our everyday lives. For the media industry specifically, digitalisation and associated advancements in communication technology have irrevocably upended consumers' use, preference, and engagement with media products. Prior to widespread digitalisation, media houses, particularly in the West, relied on a 'dual business model' whereby companies were able to sell their products to separate markets: news and general information to individuals and advertising space or time to clients who wanted to reach a broad audience.<sup>4</sup> In effect, traditional media houses acted as gatekeepers for much public information, deciding on and curating the news and stories of the day. In other words, even though consumers had the choice between different newspaper, radio or TV brands they still relied on these media houses for information.

With digitalisation, the advent of the internet and the rise of powerful tech and social media corporations, legacy media houses' revenue streams have steadily drained away, as consumers are no longer reliant on traditional media houses. Instead, consumers now have access to an immense pool of information and entertainment via a host of online platforms and services, often for free. Globally, money spend on advertising increasingly flows towards websites and social media platforms such as Google, Facebook (now Meta Platforms) and YouTube. These tech firms with global reach provide cheap digital adverts that can be targeted to individual customers based on their digital footprint. Information cited by a recent UNESCO report on media trends notes that in 2021 two tech multinationals alone, Meta (formerly Facebook Inc.) and Google, accounted for "more than half of the digital advertising market" worldwide.<sup>5</sup> In comparison print media's share of advertising spending – a crucial source of money for newspapers and magazines – has steadily declined. Indeed, according to Zenith data, between 2016 and 2021 global ad spend utilising print media declined from 16.5 to 8 percent (%).<sup>6</sup>

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Franz Krüger, a South African academic and former journalist, summarises the implications of this development on the traditional media landscape:

"The trend has, quite simply, eaten traditional journalism's lunch. The business model that sustained journalism for around a century in much of the world is in terminal decline, with closures and job losses now common. At the same time, the rise of social media has democratized communication, with some very positive effects. But it has also opened the door to a flood of disinformation, and made it much more difficult for consumers to distinguish reliable material from everything else."<sup>7</sup>

A recent UNESCO report tracking trends in freedom of expression and media development argues that the collapse of independent media outlets is posing a direct threat to journalism as an essential 'public good' that is intrinsic to the development and growth of a democratic society. Public goods are defined as services or commodities that should be available and accessible to all citizens such as potable water and basic health care. Quality journalism provides crucial and reliable information of public concern to citizens while playing an important watchdog role in relation to government and private sector actions. Indeed, the value of communicating trustworthy and accurate information to the public was underscored by the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Njuguna, Wanja. "Media: Where are the Women?" New Era. May 5, 2021. <https://neweralive.na/posts/media-where-are-the-women>

<sup>4</sup> R Emmert, Dietrich. Namibia's Media: Facing the Digital Challenge. IPPR. January 2019. 11.

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO. Journalism Is a Public Good: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, Global Report 2021/2022. 2022. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Krüger, Franz. 4.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, 20-1.



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Press freedom is a broad concept that relies on three core components: media freedom, media independence and media pluralism. Quality, diverse and critical journalistic work needs all three components in equal and strong measure. However, a flagging media industry beset by financial issues can easily lead to business compromises such as restricting critical reporting on a sizable advertising client, thereby eroding press freedom.<sup>9</sup> The future of news media and its ability to sustain a high level of press freedom unencumbered by vested interests or systems remains highly uncertain according to the UNESCO trends report. Increasingly, emphasis is placed on securing the media's viability to operate with a high level of independence and to be accessible to the wider public.<sup>10</sup>

In the long-term, journalistic work could be sustainably generated outside the prevailing commercial media business model; some form of community or donor model supporting and sustaining critical news reporting is also plausible. Yet the commercial 'media system model' that relies on advertising and sales is still widely prevalent across the world.

Dark predictions of journalism's looming collapse might seem exaggerated. Nevertheless, legacy and 'new media' houses are under intense financial pressures, unsure of the steps that need to be taken towards a more viable future.

### **4. Summary of the 2019 Media Study: Calm before the Storm?**

The impact the digital revolution on the media business has been ongoing at least since the 1980s when some of the first electronic news services came into being. The creation and growth of the world wide web drew in established media houses such as CNN and The Chicago Tribune that launched their own digital products in the early 90s.<sup>11</sup> While technological developments are often introduced tardily across the continent in comparison to the rest of the world,<sup>12</sup> Namibian media houses have grappled with digitalisation for many years now. Therefore, it is useful to briefly recap on the key observations and findings of the 2019 NMT/IPPR study, to easier reflect on recent developments and trends which may have either become more pronounced or proven short-lived in recent years:

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1. Internet as a source of information is steadily growing albeit from a low base; however, TV and especially radio still dominate citizen user habits. The small number of regular newspaper readers is declining; mobile network coverage has expanded and improved considerably over the past ten years.
2. Limited broadband coverage and the high cost of internet data benefit legacy media operations. However, Afrobarometer surveys indicate that younger Namibians (18–35-year-olds) source news increasingly from social media rather than from newspapers.
3. Legacy media representatives were more concerned about the effects of the country's poor economic situation as opposed to digitalisation. They also expressed worries about an increasingly fragmented market, as well as regional and international competition. Furthermore, the highly competitive advertising market was placing strain on revenue generation.
4. Broadcast media acknowledged pressure from the digital revolution in that streaming services were becoming stiff competition and resulting in advertising revenue fall; broadcasters also felt that CRAN local licence fees placed them at a disadvantage towards international competitors.
5. Most large legacy media houses had established digital presences and offered a modicum of digital products, but these made up only a small share of overall revenue; investments and innovation in digital products were limited. Most media businesses did not seem to have a comprehensive plan to confront the digitalisation challenge.
6. There were indications that journalistic standards have dropped. As businesses went digital only or cut costs, media workers lost jobs and experienced journalists were leaving the profession. It appeared that legacy media's work was less valued by Namibian society.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Remmert, 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO, 16, 24-5.

<sup>11</sup> Sanburn, Josh. "A Brief History of Digital News." TIME. February 1, 2011. <http://content.time.com/time/business/article/0,8599,2045682,00.html>

<sup>12</sup> Krüger, Franz. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Remmert, 29-30.

One of the most pertinent overall findings of the study highlighted the issue that media managers and editors felt their businesses were beset by several linked challenges:

“... Most local media representatives interviewed for this study were far more concerned about the effects of the country’s poor economic situation on their respective businesses rather than the imminent threat of digitalisation. This view also underlines the fact that there are many other interconnected challenges facing independent media houses in the country. Among others these range from government regulations and limited skills among journalists, to a highly competitive advertising market and small population size.”<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, many respondents from media houses emphasised that theirs was a difficult and arduous business requiring them to walk a fine line between remaining profitable and maintaining editorial independence while exploring and investing in new offerings to meet the looming digital challenge. Further compounding this complex balancing act was the fact that there was no clear set of solutions or blueprint to weather the problems. Consequently, many newspapers and magazines the world over had downscaled or folded, unable to remain profitable. Even media houses that had extensively invested into their website and social media presence, and digital products were not immune to insolvency.

It was thus understandable that most Namibian legacy media chose to limit their investment in digital products. Instead, they focused on containing costs, collaboration, as well as providing extra supplements and services. Arguably, this was a justifiable strategy, especially for the country’s larger and more established media houses such as newspapers under Namibia Media Holdings (NMH) and The Namibian newspaper which could still boost strong brands and garner respectable income from sales and advertising space.

On the other hand, the difficult and often precarious financial situation that local media businesses found themselves in resulted in business closures and harmed press freedom. For example, end 2016, the *Namibia Economist* newspaper became a digital-only publication and retrenched 12 staff. Strained finances limit resources for quality journalism, especially investigative and public interest reporting, both of which are costly and tend to generate little revenue. There was some evidence of sliding journalistic and editorial standards and increased tensions within newsrooms as a result of management decisions. Manipulation by vested political or business interests of media outlets was not unheard of. Working conditions for media workers had also become more difficult as evidenced by reports of experienced journalists leaving the profession, further underscoring concerns around quality reporting.<sup>15</sup>

#### Information Box 1:

##### How have the 2019 Media Scenarios Fared?

The 2019 NMT/IPPR study sketched out three possible scenarios for how Namibia’s legacy media would fare in the near future with the primary consideration being business performance as well as press freedom and working conditions for media employees.

1. The first scenario was the most optimistic: predicting that media houses would invest in innovative and successful formats, gain more customers and halt the advertising sales decline while opening up more sources of revenue including from online sources. This would improve media staff members’ working conditions, improve society’s appreciation of local media, and help secure Namibia’s press freedom.
2. Scenario two foresaw a more mixed picture. Legacy media would focus on cutting costs and mergers, directing few funds to online offerings and quality journalism. Conditions for media workers would decline. Large media houses would remain profitable, but at the cost of limiting editorial independence, reporting standards and coverage. Overall media operations would suffer leading to an erosion of press freedom and declining trust of citizen in the media.
3. The last scenario paints a dire picture of Namibia’s media. Having hardly prepared for the digital revolution, independent media houses would see their dual business model crumble. The bulk of national advertising spending would move online or to cheaper state-owned media houses. Most media houses would close, and the remainder compromise their editorial independence or be captured outright by political or commercial interest groups. Media workers would face dismal employment conditions; quality journalism covering local issues would be hard to find. State-owned media houses dominate the information sphere; Namibia’s press freedom score declines markedly.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 30-2.

<sup>16</sup> Remmert, 32.



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How have these scenarios fared in light of real-world developments in the past three and a half years? Getting a good sense of the financial health of independent local media houses is challenging. Nevertheless, it is positive to note that none of large national media houses closed down since early 2019. While print circulation continues to decrease, a diverse set of physical dailies is still sold across the country. Furthermore, a number of new media businesses and products have entered the market. Arguably this demonstrates the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit underpinning Namibia's private media operations. Nevertheless, it is evident that financial and operational difficulties for media businesses, including for large companies and state-owned media have multiplied over the past few years. Concurrently, media work has become more precarious and stressful while quality journalism has declined.

The country's current media environment probably falls between the first and second scenario: demonstrating some positive but also concerning developments. While scenario three has been avoided for now, Namibia's legacy news media is not out of the woods yet.

### **5. International Media Developments: A Brief Overview**

Besides the digitalisation challenge, media across the world has been confronted by the outbreak and rapid spread of the Covid-19 pandemic from early 2020 onwards. In turn, these twin issues have amplified and spawned several existing or new problems for media houses. Such difficulties often had an immediate impact on daily operations and sales; lockdowns for example made finding and reporting stories complicated and severely constricted sales of physical newspapers.<sup>17</sup> Over all this hangs the question of how legacy media businesses can remain viable in the long run.

While the various effects of the digital revolution and the pandemic are nearly universal, impacting all regions and countries, they play out differently across individual markets, geographical regions and media systems. For example, as the Corona virus spread across the world, countries were operating under a plethora of pandemic-induced restrictions with considerable time differences. Some nations imposed lockdowns early while others didn't. This makes it challenging to compare data across countries and discern specific patterns.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, some European media trends might not apply to certain developments in Southern Africa. It is nevertheless instructive to take a look at international and African trends with regards to the media environment, consumption and business developments, before analysing the situation for legacy media in Namibia in more depth.

Authoritative analyses from international institutions including UNESCO and the Reuters Institute, agree that the Corona pandemic has significantly compounded the challenges for media houses and consequently accelerated the move to the digital realm by the industry. Particularly newspapers and news media have seen their revenue flows slashed and their operational difficulties multiplied.<sup>19 20</sup> Prior to the pandemic, legacy media companies could still strike a balance between investing in new but hard to monetise digital products and services while maintaining their stuttering yet still profitable dual-business model. In many regions and countries, Corona has stymied this hybrid model such that digital transformation has become essential to media businesses' survival.

Globally Covid-19 and the resulting government restrictions imposed great difficulties on newspapers' daily operations. National movement restrictions meant that physical print copies could only be produced and distributed with great difficulty or not at all over many months. Even those few print copies that reached stores were often not sold, as shops remained closed or customers avoided buying papers due to contamination fears. Countries such as Germany and Switzerland with strong print circulation saw some of the greatest declines in sales.<sup>21</sup> Although newspaper sales had been falling steadily long before the outbreak of Corona, the pandemic caused this trend to accelerate. Information published by the Reuters Institute underscores physical print sales continual decline since the early 2010s. While this data is not available for all 46 countries tracked by the institute's latest Digital News Report, it does provide solid evidence of the slow death of the traditional newspaper as a common news medium (See Graph 1).<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Newman Nic with Fletcher Richard, Schulz Anne, Andi Simge, Robertson T. Craig, and Nielsen Kleis Rasmus. Reuters Institute: Digital News Report 2021, 10th Edition. 13. 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 10.

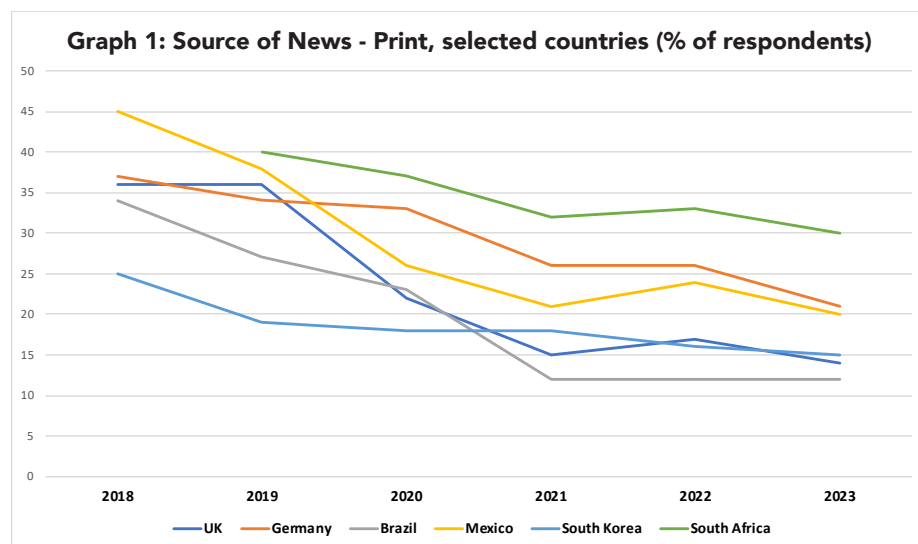
<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 13. 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Author's own calculations based on country statistics published online by the Reuters Institute. See: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2023/country-and-market-data>

Newspaper businesses in Africa are historically less established and comparable data remains patchy. Yet there are indications that print news consumption is also declining in the few African countries which boosted growing newspaper readership at the turn of the century. Thus, Afrobarometer data tracking sources of news for survey respondents indicates a slow but steady decline of daily newspaper readers in Kenya, Mauritius and South Africa, starting between 2008 and 2014 depending on the respective country.<sup>23</sup>



Source: Reuters Institute survey 2022

Other types of legacy media have also been impacted, particularly broadcasting. Pandemic-induced economic hardship has reinforced the trend of advertising expenditure being concentrated online. Tech companies do occasionally fall foul to advertising boycotts, such as Meta in 2020. The company was accused of mishandling misinformation and hate speech on its social media platforms.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, global ad spend on TV and radio continues to fall. In addition, the loss of newspaper coverage has had a negative knock-on effect on broadcasters' own journalistic volume and their associated online channels.<sup>25</sup>

Yet there are important regional differences. Findings from a 2022 survey carried out by the Reuters Institute indicate that the use of radio as the first-choice medium for accessing news in the morning for respondents in most Western nations is very limited and lags behind all other media formats with the exception of print.<sup>26</sup> Concurrently, however, a UNESCO report published in 2021 found that over-the-air, freely accessible radio remains an important source of news for people in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.<sup>27</sup>

Public Service Media (PSM) has been an important and trusted source of reliable information during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in Western European countries with independent and strong brands such as the UK's British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (ARD), Germany's regional public-service broadcaster. However, PSM remains vulnerable to "public criticism and government policies."<sup>28</sup> For example, pandemic restrictions and resulting economic and social fallouts have significantly degraded public trust in established public media houses in Australia, Canada and the UK.<sup>29</sup> Many PSM firms are dependent on government funding or overseen by state agencies, placing them at greater risk of government interference or outright control. Public broadcasters are also contending with budget cuts and the various difficulties presented by the digital revolution while their public value is being called into question in the context of increasingly polarised political climates, economic challenges and a loss of trust in public institutions.<sup>30</sup> The Reuters Institute observes that:

"...independent public media are under increasing pressure in a number of countries, with attacks on funding, questions about impartiality, and challenges in reaching younger audiences who are increasingly turning to digital and social media."<sup>31</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Author's own calculations based on Afrobarometer data, Rounds 1,1999/2001 to 8, 2019/21. See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

<sup>24</sup> Fung, Brian and Yurieff Kaya. "Hundreds of brands are pulling ads from Facebook. Its largest advertisers aren't among them." CNN Business. July 2, 2020. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/01/tech/facebook-top-advertisers/index.html>

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO, 27-8 & 30.

<sup>26</sup> Newman Nic, with Fletcher Richard, Robertson T. Craig, Eddy Kirsten, and Nielsen Kleis Rasmus. Reuters Institute: Digital News Report 2022. 23. 2022.

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>29</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 17. 2022.

<sup>30</sup> UNESCO, 32.

<sup>31</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 17. 2022.



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These challenges are also relevant for public media houses in Southern Africa and elsewhere. In a comprehensive study on digital journalism published by Rhodes University and the Open Society Foundation for South Africa in 2021, the author, Harry Dugmore suggests that one of the key questions confronting PSM globally is that of funding. Accordingly, the report contemplates what kind of finance model could best meet the challenges surrounding digitalisation, economic constraints, representation and editorial independence of public media institutions such as the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC).<sup>32</sup> On a positive note, the proliferation of these sorts of debates about the shape and fairness of funding models in the aftermath of Covid-19 offer an opportunity to drive necessary reform of PSM globally to a more sustainable and credible model.

Online only news organisations have not been exempted from the extraordinary challenges disrupting legacy media businesses. The increasing capture of online advertising revenue by technology companies and their digital platforms, a process that became more accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic, has undermined an already fragile independent news media environment on a global scale. Newsrooms of major brands have seen layoffs and waves of restructuring while some outlets have been permanently closed. Smaller media businesses both in developed and developing countries face an even more uncertain future given their reduced resources, funds and access to finances.<sup>33</sup> This will likely also have implications for Namibia's legacy media which is increasingly active in the digital sphere.

In the past, a number of observers have stated that small legacy media outlets could remain relevant to consumers and turn a profit by diligently reporting on local issues and being closely identified with the local community, thereby fostering greater personal engagement and brand loyalty. The evidence that this approach works is however very limited. In the USA, for example, hundreds of local newspapers have folded in the past 15 years or so.<sup>34</sup>

In its 2021 Digital News Report, the Reuters Institute sought to test the appeal of local news to consumers to gauge if savvy local media operations could be viable. The data however indicates that respondents from 38 countries accessed local information only for a few selected topics; for all other topic options respondents reported accessing them far less or not at all in the past week. Of the 15 topics presented just three topics accessed via locally available information drew respectable numbers: local Covid-19 information (53 %), local weather forecast (50 %), and local politics (32 %). Most other topics including local crime news, local sport and jobs came in at 25 % or much lower. There are, of course, important regional differences. For example, respondents in India, Romania and Austria reported a far higher rate of local media consumption and more feelings of attachment to their respective local communities.<sup>35</sup>

Attachment to local news is only a partial explanation of local media businesses' relevance. Local radio stations and newspapers have also seen increased competition with local businesses, authorities and politicians sharing community news via social media or websites. Local information which previously was the domain of media houses – local services, jobs and restaurant information are now more frequently sought via "specialised websites or apps."<sup>36</sup> Management of local media businesses are taking these shifting consumer habits into account by, for example, focusing on local politics and editorials to distinguish their products from other broader-based information streams. Yet it remains to be seen if these efforts will prove successful and secure the financial viability of smaller local media outlets.<sup>37</sup> For Namibia, where local content is still seen as a strong drawcard for home-grown media businesses, this information should be deeply troubling.

<sup>32</sup> Dugmore Harry. Thinking globally, acting locally: Reviving and sustaining South African journalism in a post-Covid world. Rhodes University & Open Society Foundation for South Africa. March 2021. 51-2.

<sup>33</sup> UNESCO, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Abernathy Muse Penney. "Why Local News Matters, and What We Can Do to Save It." New York State Bar Association. January 12, 2019. <https://nysba.org/why-local-news-matters-and-what-we-can-do-to-save-it/>

<sup>35</sup> Schulz Anne. "Local News Unbundled: Where Audience Value Still Lies." In: Newman Nic, et al. Digital News Report 2021. 42. 2021.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 46.



**Information Box 2:****International Media Developments**

1. Consumption of media continues to move online, a trend that has been further accelerated by the pandemic, as fewer and fewer people turn to legacy media such as newspapers, TV and radio for news and entertainment.<sup>38</sup> According to accounting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PWC), daily newspaper circulation dropped worldwide from 5.6 billion in 2016 to 4.5 billion in 2020, a decline of 15 % overall.<sup>39</sup>
2. News media's finances have been especially hard hit by the pandemic, undermining quality journalism and a pluralistic and independent media. Press freedom has also continued to decline across the world; by one measure, 85 % of the global population has experienced a decline in press freedoms over the past five years.<sup>40</sup>
3. Years of increasing mis- and disinformation, developments that have been further amplified by the pandemic, have seen trust in media decline worldwide.<sup>41</sup> Despite a brief increase during the peak of Coronavirus, trust in news media has fallen again. A 2022 Reuters Institute survey of 46 countries carried out by YouGov found that around four out of ten respondents (42 %) say they trust most news most of the time,<sup>42</sup> down from 44 % in 2021.<sup>43</sup>
4. Coupled with the loss of trust, interest in news media is falling among a growing number of people; Reuters Institute indicates a marked drop in news interest from 63 % in 2017 to 51 % in 2022 across all surveyed countries. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of consumers intentionally avoid news media; many respondents stated that they didn't want news to impact their mood negatively.<sup>44</sup>
5. Countries have enacted various new policies and laws, partially as a means to tackle disinformation and cybersecurity concerns; according to UNESCO, 44 countries worldwide have adopted or amended such laws since 2016. Due to the oftentimes vague language contained in such legislation, many regulations threaten online freedom of expression and media freedom. Concurrently, at least 160 states continue to carry criminal defamation laws on their books which can be misused to silence critical media reporting.<sup>45</sup>
6. Much quality journalism from online or print has moved behind paywalls and is only accessible via paid subscription, donations, membership or one-off payment. This has garnered some positive results, mostly for established media brands in wealthy Western countries. Indeed, an average of 17 % of respondents in a Reuters Institute survey carried out across 20 nations reported that they had paid for some kind of online news in 2020, an improvement of two percentage points compared to the previous year.<sup>46</sup>
7. News organisations find it increasingly challenging to connect with younger audiences particularly those under 30 years of age; having grown up with social media, this group displays unique media consumption habits. Younger consumers prefer to access news via social media or aggregators; the Reuters Institute found 15 % of 18-24 years-olds used TikTok to access news. Younger audiences are also more likely to struggle to understand news than older consumers and in many markets are reluctant to pay for news.<sup>47</sup>
8. Working conditions for journalists across the world have deteriorated during the pandemic. This stretches from job security, remuneration and access to resources as well as physical and online safety of media workers when pursuing their work. A survey among 1,400 journalists from 125 countries by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism carried out in mid-2020, found that 65 % of respondents felt less secure in their jobs and over one-fifth (21 %) had their salaries cut.
9. The emergence of the digital revolution has allowed the cheap production and distribution of information in many different formats including audio and video. However, according to latest survey data from the Reuters Institute, a majority of respondents across all 46 surveyed countries, stated that they still prefer consuming online news via text as opposed to video. However, younger audiences are significantly more likely to watch rather than read news.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, having slowed in the first year of the pandemic, growth in the consumption of podcasts has resumed with 34 % of respondents having consumed one or more podcasts in the last month on average across 20 developed countries.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Newman Nic, et. al. 10. 2022.

<sup>39</sup> UNESCO, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 10-1.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>42</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 10. 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 10. 2021.

<sup>44</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 10. 2022.

<sup>45</sup> UNESCO, 48.

<sup>46</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 10 & 3. 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 10, 1 & 4. 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 28.



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### **6. Global Media Development: A Question of Perspective & Data**

Although the digital revolution is global in scope, this does not mean that its effects are applied in equal measure across all continents, geographic regions and countries. For example, the 2019 NMT/IPPR study highlighted media representatives' view that digitalisation and online-ad spend was not a big challenge to local media houses in Namibia. Instead, the prevailing poor economic situation and fragmentation of audiences was seen as a bigger threat.<sup>50</sup>

This example illustrates the great difficulties in generalising conditions across a complex industry within a global context. Reputable international institutions and research organisations acknowledge this diversity. The Reuters Institute, for example, seeks to deepen its readership's understanding of the news media globally and to identify common trends. At the same time, the Institute also underlines the methodological limitations of its data collection strategies and differences in physical infrastructures across geographical regions making it inadvisable to broadly compare all datapoints between markets.<sup>51</sup> In other words, comparing the respective media businesses of a developing country with limited internet penetration, with a wealthy state boosting cheap and accessible broadband internet would be like comparing apples with oranges.

The concept of different media system models has been established in order to account for a multitude of media landscapes and make-ups. Crucially, business and financial models can and do take different shapes; some media markets might be more commercial while others remain dependent on public monies. Thus, it is recommended that direct comparison between media markets is limited and practised cautiously. In addition, the media market in Africa is diverse and often underdeveloped.<sup>52</sup>

Another significant impediment to establishing a sound, global picture of the media business is a dearth of data, particularly when it comes to developing countries primarily located in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific. Additionally, while more governments are collecting data to improve decision-making, many of these datasets are often hard to access as few authorities adhere to open data practices.<sup>53</sup>

UNESCO together with its partners is trying to address this challenge. Similarly, the Reuters Institute is including more developing countries in its sample to provide a more comprehensive and balanced media analysis.<sup>54 55</sup> Academics and researchers from developing countries are increasingly seeking to establish their own voices regarding media and journalism studies and 'de-westernizing' or 'decolonizing' the field, by putting forth theories, studies and datasets that diverge or even counter Western assumptions of journalism and the media industry.<sup>56</sup>

It is important to engage with such undertakings to enrich the field with fresh ideas from the Global South which can help to address global data deficiencies. However, such discussions go beyond the scope of this study.

### **7. Overview: Recent Developments in Namibia's Media Environment**

Undoubtedly, Namibia's media environment for businesses, especially newspapers, has changed significantly since early 2019. The relentless drive of digitalisation, the Covid-19 pandemic emergency, and the country's ongoing economic difficulties have forced media houses to restructure their operations to remain profitable. Concurrently, businesses have had to fast-track plans and strategies to confront the digital revolution – primarily by creating new digital services and products. Smaller newspapers with few plans and a meagre digital presence suffered dearly; but large, established brands and PSM were also roiled by falling sales and ad revenues as well as pandemic-related restrictions which disrupted day-to-day operations. In many respects, Namibia's media experience now mirrors global conditions (See Info Box 2). However, it is hard to disaggregate the impact of the various phenomena; the digital tech revolution has been ongoing for decades, while Namibia's economy has seen little or no growth since 2016.<sup>57</sup> The pandemic and its associated socioeconomic disruptions are more recent and fresher in people's minds. It is clear however that Covid-19 has accelerated the country's embrace of the digital transformation.

<sup>50</sup> Rimmert, 20-1

<sup>51</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 6. 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Rimmert, 10 & 3.

<sup>53</sup> UNESCO, 111 & 3.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 116-8.

<sup>55</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 5. 2022.

<sup>56</sup> See for example: Mutsvauro Bruce, Borges-Rey Eddy, Bebawi Saba, Márquez-Ramírez Mireya, Mellado Claudia, Mabwezara Mawindi Hayes, Demeter Marton, Glowacki Michal, Badr Hanan, and Thussu Daya. Different, But the Same: How the Global South Is Challenging the Hegemonic Epistemologies and Ontologies of Westernized/Western-Centric Journalism Studies. In: Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly. AEJMC. 1-21. October 2021. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/355641414>

<sup>57</sup> IPPR. Namibia Quarterly Economic Review Q1 2021. 1. January – March 2021

1. Afrobarometer data<sup>58</sup> indicates that the use of various media formats has not changed markedly over recent years, besides access to the internet which has seen steady growth for the past decade. Radio still dominates consumers' media use with just over 83 % of respondents accessing news via this medium every day or a few times per week in 2019.
2. According to Afrobarometer data, more people are making use of the internet both to source news and more generally; however, uptake has slowed in recent years which could reflect Namibia's ongoing economic distress. Moreover, in 2019 44 % of respondents stated that they never made use of the internet. By contrast, daily use of social media as a news source (27 %) has outpaced daily newspaper readers (23 %), although newspaper access on multiple days per week still outranked social media use (See Graphs 2 & 3).
3. Newspaper representatives appeared to be more committed to developing and offering digital-based products and strategizing around new ways of generating revenue beyond the dual-business model based on advertising and physical sales of newspapers; however, it was noted that this work also put great strain on existing operations and resources. Medium- and long-term prospects to ensure future financial sustainability were more uncertain than pre-pandemic.
4. The increased focus on establishing new revenue streams, cost-cutting and optimising operations has led to paradoxical changes in Namibia's media offerings since 2020. Newspapers have grown thinner while reporting volume and quality has declined. On the other hand, established legacy media houses have introduced new, new digital products and experimented with different formats.
5. In relation to the above point above, recent years have seen a partial consolidation of the market as existing media houses have shared resources and entered into more collaborations; some businesses have also merged in an effort to mitigate the financial impact of a struggling economy and the pandemic. Counterintuitively, new businesses have also entered the crowded local media market including Eagle FM, a talk radio station, and *The Brief*, an online news portal focused on business.
6. There is evidence that during the course of the pandemic media audiences were looking for trustworthy and authoritative information; however, this appeared to be lacking from authorities particularly at the start of the pandemic.<sup>59</sup> In turn, media houses failed to actively fact-check Covid-19 information and were unresponsive to public discussions. This left a vacuum which was filled with disinformation primarily via social media channels.<sup>60</sup> As a result, many consumers appeared to become more distrustful of information published by Namibia's mainstream media.
7. Almost all media representatives and observers acknowledged that the outbreak of Covid-19 and its resulting restrictions put media houses in Namibia under enormous operational and financial pressure. Newspapers suffered particularly significant revenue losses. Moreover, legacy media's existing and new digital offerings have not been able to replace losses. Consequently, while already a priority pre-pandemic, businesses' financial viability had become the top issue for management.
8. There are growing indications that tensions between editorial and business management is becoming more commonplace, as foreseen by the NMT/IPPR 2019 study.<sup>61</sup> The decline of quality in news reporting and journalistic stories over the past years can be seen as a result of these increased internal conflicts. In response, editors and media managers have established or placed more emphasis on factual reporting, in-house training and internal review mechanisms to maintain editorial independence.<sup>62 63 64</sup>
9. In line with international experiences, local media employees' working conditions worsened during the course of the pandemic; many staff had their salaries cut and some were retrenched. Media workers faced additional challenges when doing their work such as movement restrictions and isolated incidents of harassment by authorities.<sup>65</sup> In response, some industry workers went on strike and also initiated a union for journalists and media workers – the first of its kind in the country.<sup>66 67</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Author's own calculations based on Afrobarometer data on Namibia, Rounds 5 – 8. See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Beyleveld Natasja. NaMedia. Windhoek, May 12, 2022.

<sup>60</sup> Namibia Fact Check. News: Undoing social (media) contagion. July 30, 2020. <https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/undoing-social-media-contagion/>

<sup>61</sup> Remmert, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Maletsky, Christof. NEPC, Windhoek. June 16, 2022.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni. *The Namibian*, Windhoek. June 15, 2022.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank. *Allgemeine Zeitung-NMH*, Windhoek. June 20, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> See for example: Ngatjheue, Charmaine. "Media bemoan exclusion from press briefing." *The Namibian*. April 2, 2020.

<https://www.namibian.com.na/199747/archive-read/Media-bemoan-exclusion-from-press-briefing>

<sup>66</sup> *Public Media Alliance*. "Update: Strike continues at Namibian public broadcaster." May 18, 2021.

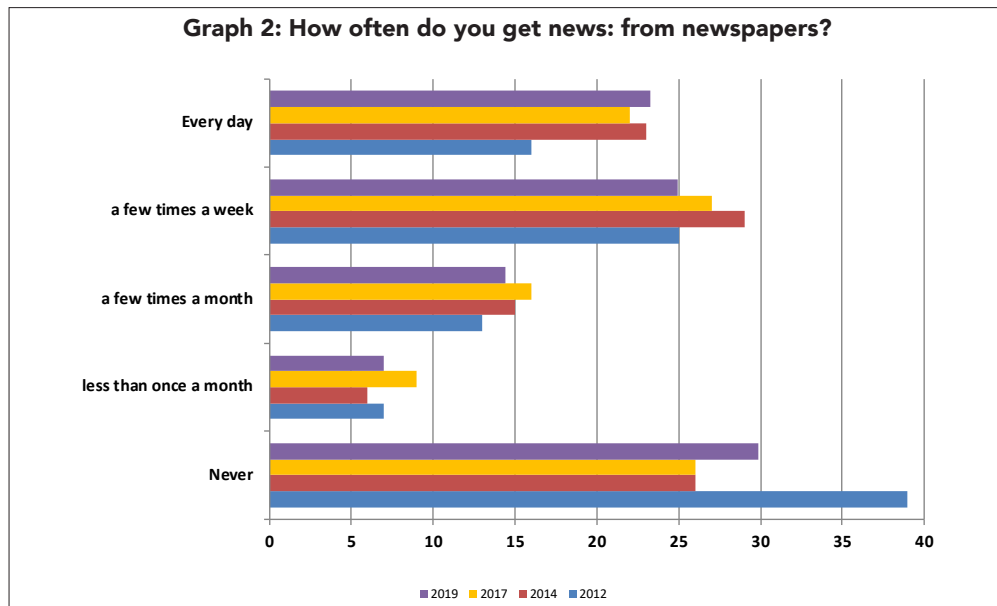
<https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/update-strike-continues-at-namibian-public-broadcaster/>

<sup>67</sup> *Namibia Economist*. "Journalists launch media professionals union." November 23, 2020.

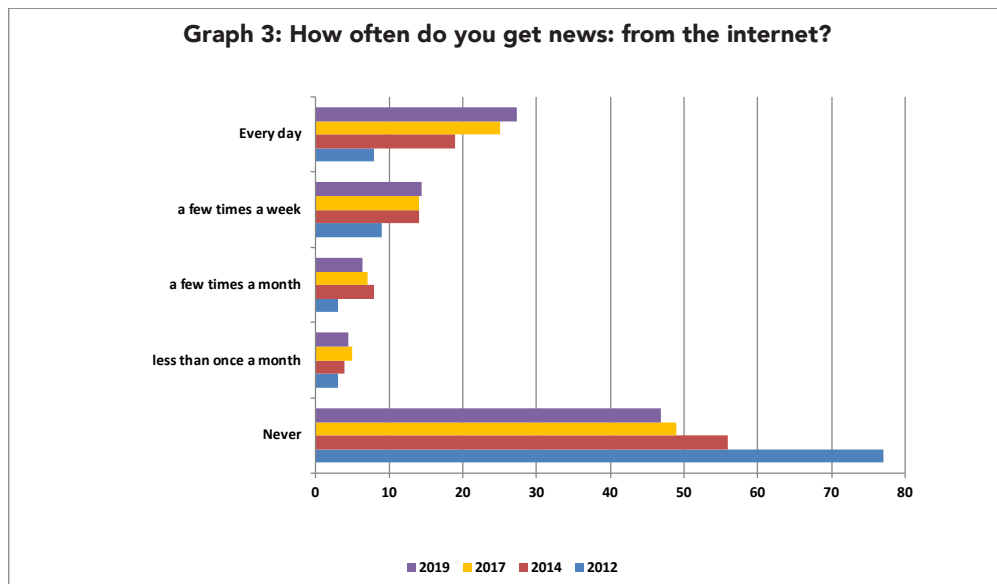
<https://economist.com.na/57483/human-resources/journalists-launch-media-professionals-union/>



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Source: Namibian media consumption - Afrobarometer surveys 2012-2019



Source: Namibian media consumption - Afrobarometer surveys 2012-2019

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### *The Shifting Media Environment: Common challenges and themes – Individual responses*

The overview above gives a broad understanding of key changes and issues faced by Namibia's legacy media. Yet, there are many different aspects, views and contradictions to the points mentioned above. It is also notable that there are a few developments which can be seen as unique to Namibia such as the ongoing high value placed on print adverts. However, whether these are long-term trends that will continue to defy international developments remains to be seen.

The following sections will delve further into specific themes outlined in the overview and how media representatives and experts perceive the challenges facing media businesses today. While digitalisation is given its own subhead – it is arguably the most significant underlying factor disrupting the operations of the media industry.

## 8. Economic Recession & Covid-19

Overall, the majority of interviewees who participated in this study agreed that the Covid-19 pandemic and its related national health restrictions (lockdowns, curfews, movement restrictions, business operational limits etc.) resulted in a host of negative consequences for media houses particularly in terms of revenue generation. Opinions, however, differ on its proportional impact given Namibia's already tough business environment pre-pandemic. Exact newspaper circulation figures for Namibia's press are difficult to access and verify. It is however an open secret that physical circulation numbers overall have been declining for years.<sup>68</sup> A trend which, admittedly belatedly, reflects international press experiences.

Tangeni Amupadhi, editor-in-chief of *The Namibian* newspaper, and Christof Maletsky, CEO of *New Era* Publication Corporation (NEPC) which publishes the daily *New Era* newspaper, both acknowledged that sales of print copies had dropped dramatically. *The Namibian* lost half its circulation during the country's severe first lockdown from the March 28 to May 4, while *New Era* experienced a fall in circulation of around 65 %. Covid-19-related restrictions made it difficult for the print press to produce and distribute print copies as government regulations forced many businesses to close or restrict their business hours.<sup>69 70</sup> According to academic William Heuva, the weekly *Windhoek Observer* newspaper cut its weekly print-run from 36,000 to 16,000 copies during 2020. By the middle of 2020, the newspaper ceased printing hardcopies and migrated to offering online content for free. However, the *Windhoek Observer's* editor-in-chief Kuvée Kanguuehi has also stated in a newspaper article that the business was already undergoing a re-structuring and cost-cutting exercise prior to start of the pandemic in order to mitigate falling sales.<sup>73</sup>

Notwithstanding the situations of individual print press outlets prior to the pandemic, the Covid-19 emergency undoubtedly accounted for a large proportion of lost print circulation. Information captured in a Master's thesis by Hilary Mare suggests that *New Era's* weekday print-run was cut from 24,000 to 11,000 copies.<sup>74</sup> Mare's interviews with staff and managers of three newspapers, *The Namibian*, *New Era* and *Confidente*, also showed that sales continued to worsen as the pandemic progressed. Unfortunately, Mare's thesis gives no timeline however it appears his thesis's data was collected in 2020 and before Covid-19 vaccinations were rolled out from March 2021. By the time Namibia experienced its third wave of infections and deaths in July 2021, the weekly *Confidente* had slashed its print-run by more than two thirds per edition or from 30,000 to around 8,500 copies.<sup>75 76</sup> Mare's thesis quotes the paper's distribution manager:

"We have had to drastically cut down our print runs and we have seen how Covid-19 in the third wave made it practically impossible for us to sell copies of the newspapers. We had to adjust the copies so that we limit returns and save on printing costs."<sup>77</sup>

The pandemic's impact was not confined to newspapers print sales revenue. Health restrictions dragged down many other sectors of the national economy resulting in legacy media's advertising clients reducing their marketing budgets – a crucial revenue stream. According to Amupadhi, many of *The Namibian's* advertising clients, especially those who bought smaller and classified spaces, had seen their businesses collapse.<sup>78</sup> Gary Stroebel, CEO of Future Media, echoes Amupadhi's observation noting that Covid-19 had not only upended the country's media business but also many of their clients' businesses.<sup>79</sup>

It is apparent that local legacy media was already suffering under Namibia's struggling economy while also feeling the bite of digitalisation, albeit at a slower pace than international trends before the pandemic. However, most media businesses were still doing fairly well financially under their established dual-business model, relying primarily on traditional media formats while digital products were limited and often treated as an afterthought.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Remmert, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni. *The Namibian*, Windhoek. June 15, 2022.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Maletsky, Christof. NEPC, Windhoek. June 16, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Heuva William. The Impact of COVID-19 on the Digitalization of the Namibian Media. In: Dralega Azungi Carol and Napakol Angella. Health Crises and Media Discourses in Sub-Saharan Africa. Springer. 46-7. 2022.

<sup>72</sup> Ngutjinazo Okeri. "Namibia's media – waving or drowning?" *The Namibian*. August 7, 2020.

<https://www.namibian.com.na/203322/archive-read/Namibias-media-%E2%80%93-waving-or-drowning>

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Mare, Hilary. Investigating the implications of Covid-19 on the sustainability of the print media in Namibia: A case study of *The Namibian*, *Confidente* and *New Era*. MA thesis, unpublished. 42. November 2021.

<sup>75</sup> Granville, Samantha. "Covid in Namibia: 'Fifteen of my relatives have died'." BBC News. July 15, 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57748119>

<sup>76</sup> Mare, 43.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary. FutureMedia, Windhoek. June 17, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> Remmert, 35-6.



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However, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting loss of key revenue sources for the press, the industry was forced into a reckoning with the digital revolution and its consequences for media houses. Thus, where digital platforms, products and services before 2020 made up only a small segment of operations, they quickly shifted to become a central tenet of media business models. Lockdowns curbed both the supply and demand for physical newspapers.

Online news and digital products such as electronic newsletters suddenly became essential in distributing and accessing news. In turn, editors, journalists, and media workers had to drastically adapt daily operations. For example, journalists had to attend press briefings online and rely more on digital video conferencing platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams and internet searches. Requiring no physical medium for listeners to collect, broadcasters nevertheless had to adapt their operation: studios adjusted work schedules to minimise staff interactions and some radio presenters pre-recorded programme segments from home.<sup>81 82</sup>

According to Frank Steffen, the editor of the German language newspaper *Allgemeine Zeitung*, owned by Namibia Media Holdings (NMH), and Future Media's Stroebel, increased reliance on digital channels for their core business of providing news, information and selling advertising space have accelerated efforts to digitise the industry. For Stroebel, Covid-19 ushered in a call for "last rounds at the bar" for local media houses. Fundamental changes to business operations and digitalisation could not be delayed further and had to be enacted immediately. He therefore estimates that around five years' worth of transformational changes were compressed into six months because of the pandemic.<sup>83</sup> Steffen voiced a similar opinion noting that it was imperative for media houses to move into the digital space to remain financially viable and that the time-window to do so successfully was around 10 years (citing an estimate from the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers or WAN-IFRA - a trade association). He noted further that the Covid-19 pandemic had likely shrunk this window to approximately three to five years.<sup>84</sup>

In addition to the significant reduction of print-runs, legacy media houses also employed other cost-cutting strategies. For example, the CEO of NMH, Albe Botha, announced in a statement at the start of May 2020 that the media house had reduced staff's working hours such that they would receive a 20 % reduction in their salaries. Botha stressed further that this action was taken to protect jobs while giving the company time to assess the pandemic's impact and to realign their business model to a smaller economy.<sup>85</sup> According to a news article from August 2020 citing *Confidante's* editor Max Hamata, the weekly cut staff salaries by 15 % and closed their two regional offices in Ongwediva and Swakopmund to reduce company overheads.<sup>86</sup> Information from Mare's master's thesis indicates that the newspapers' management also cut staff salaries by a further 15 % in 2021 and did not replace employees who resigned. Consequently, Hamata indicated that the newspaper was currently relying on only a single freelancer for all news coverage in the populous northern regions.<sup>87</sup>

The examples above indicate the severe financial pressures placed on the Namibian press as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, health restrictions and the resulting economic downturn. Smaller, weekly newspapers like *Confidante* and *Windhoek Observer* were particularly affected due to having little savings, limited revenue streams and credit lines. Consequently, the *Windhoek Observer* reduced staff and eventually migrated online. Meanwhile, *Confidante* remains operational but there are indications that the business is struggling financially. In January 2022, it was reported that staff briefly went on strike, claiming that they had not been paid their December salaries.<sup>88</sup>

However, Namibia's larger media houses were also not immune to the economic fallout. At the start of June 2020, *The Namibian's* editor-in-chief announced that the newspaper would be carrying out a restructuring exercise to "contain costs and streamline the business." He stated that the company would offer staff above 55 years of age voluntary retirement and others voluntary retrenchment packages; in addition, remaining staff would have their benefits reduced. The restructuring aimed to put the newspaper on a more even and stable financial footing and to improve efficiencies in its operational structure by eliminating redundant positions.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>81</sup> See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Videotelephony> and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_conferencing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_conferencing)

<sup>82</sup> United Nations Namibia. "Perceptions of the voices behind Touch FM Youth Radio station." April 17, 2020. <https://namibia.un.org/en/53454-perceptions-voices-behind-touch-fm-youth-radio-station>

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>84</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank. *Allgemeine Zeitung-NMH*, Windhoek. June 20, 2022.

<sup>85</sup> Shikongo Arlana. "NMH cuts staff salaries." *The Namibian*. May 5, 2020. <https://www.namibian.com.na/200626/archive-read/NMH-cuts-staff-salaries>

<sup>86</sup> Ngutjinazo, Okeri. "Namibia's media – waving or drowning?"

<sup>87</sup> Mare, 47.

<sup>88</sup> *The Namibian*. "Confidante workers get their pay." January 10, 2022. <https://www.namibian.com.na/6216899/archive-read/Confidante-workers-get-their-pay>

<sup>89</sup> Ngatjheue Charmaine. "The Namibian to undergo restructuring to contain costs." *The Namibian*. June 2, 2020. <https://www.namibian.com.na/201362/archive-read/The-Namibian-to-undergo-restructuring-to-contain-costs>

In this study's interview, Amupadhi underscored that the paper had faced an existential crisis which required the drastic and painful restructuring of operations and that delaying the restructuring was not an option as the paper would have succumbed to bankruptcy by early 2021 had the necessary changes not been made. Consequently, *The Namibian* lost around 40 % of its staff complement, some of whom were later re-employed, mostly however on a freelance basis.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Mare's research suggests that the paper's workforce was trimmed by 50 %.<sup>91</sup>

*The Namibian's* dire financial state due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing economic recession can be surmised from Amupadhi's statement to staff quoted in a news article:

"A lot has changed in news media and for Namibia it's worse as the economy has been in a recession for four years. Revenue down, reserves down, we have been living on overdrafts. If overdrafts were a drug, we would definitely overdose and kill ourselves."<sup>92</sup>

Undoubtedly, PSM entities in Namibia were also negatively impacted by Covid-19. From a business perspective however, there are two important caveats when considering PSM's viability. Firstly, state-owned media have struggled with financial issues on-and off for the past two decades or so. All the country's PSM rely to some extent on government funding, supplemented by advertising and other revenue streams such as television licences fees payable to the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC). Yet the funding model for state-owned media houses is not adequate for their operations and is oftentimes beset by poor business planning and alleged mismanagement.<sup>93 94</sup>

Secondly, while public media houses face ongoing financial constraints, particularly with government having reduced PSM subsidies due to fiscal checks, it can be argued that these are less of an existential threat.<sup>95</sup> PSM are crucial to showcasing government and state activities and providing important information to the public. Government will therefore ensure that state-media houses like the NBC and the NEPC will not collapse outright. Thus, for example, the state-owned NEPC's total liabilities far exceed its total assets in the tens of millions of Namibian Dollars for the financial year 2018/19 and 2019/20.<sup>96</sup> Summarising NEPC's poor financial situation the official audit report, published by the Office of the Auditor General (OAG), observed that:

"...a material uncertainty exists that may cast significant doubt on the entity's ability to continue as a going concern."<sup>97</sup>

However, NEPC continues to operate. Although NEPC's CEO Christof Maletsky acknowledged that the media house was already on a difficult financial footing pre-pandemic, he argued that while NEPC was government-owned, it had to source most of its operational funds – around 83 % – from the private sector through advertising space, circulation and other products and services. According to Maletsky, government funding, including money spent on ads by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), made up the smallest slice of the businesses' revenue.<sup>98</sup>

## 9. Digitalisation & Journalism: The Challenges of Ensuring Media Viability

The process of 'moving to digital' for legacy media businesses is not merely a pro-forma step that can be achieved quickly by offering consumers a simple website link or encouraging them to subscribe to a social media channel. An insightful article published by WAN-IFRA cautions traditional print media that establishing a strong digital presence that is attractive to younger audiences especially cannot be treated as an add-on to the print product if: "...the quality of the news product on mobile/computer is poor and mediocre. It doesn't work. It doesn't succeed. It is ignored."<sup>99</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>91</sup> Mare, 45.

<sup>92</sup> Ngatjiheue. "The Namibian to undergo restructuring to contain costs."

<sup>93</sup> Heuva, 43-4.

<sup>94</sup> The Namibian. "Editorial: Fix NBC, Remove Politicians." September 13, 2019. <https://www.namibian.com.na/193022/archive-read/Fix-NBC-Remove-Politicians>

<sup>95</sup> Kahiurika Ndanki. "Budget cuts threaten to 'gag' state media." *The Namibian*. September 17, 2019.

<https://www.namibian.com.na/193129/archive-read/Budget-cuts-threaten-to-gag-state-media>

<sup>96</sup> OAG. Report of the Auditor-General on the accounts of New Era Publications Corporation for the financial year ended 31 March 2020. 1 & 42. August 2021.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Maletsky Christof.

<sup>99</sup> Smith Doug. "Rethinking your news products to connect with new audiences – lessons from Table Stakes Europe." WAN-IFRA. July 26, 2022.

<https://wan-ifra.org/2022/07/rethinking-your-news-products-to-connect-with-new-audiences-lessons-from-table-stakes-europe/>



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From a Namibian perspective, this statement invokes considerable tension. As aforementioned earlier in this paper, Namibian legacy media representatives have previously tended to downplay the risks surrounding digital disruptions and have instead placed more emphasis on other challenges such as the small local market. Yet, at the same time, many local media owners, editors and managers were keenly aware of the need to adjust their respective business models long before the outbreak of Covid-19. The conundrum that media houses face is that it remains extremely challenging to make adequate money from digital media products.

According to Peter Deselaers, Programme Director at Deutsche Welle (DW) Akademie's Namibia office, the issue depends on the changing distribution of journalism content and how local media houses can find a sustainable business model that takes into account these changes.<sup>100</sup> Relying on advertising in the digital sphere to fund media operations has proven vastly insufficient internationally. Media businesses in the West have turned to various methods to try and generate money or monetize digital media content including subscriptions and paywalls with mixed and oftentimes sobering results. Suffice to say the news media business globally is held to be in a deep crisis, threatening critical, accessible and independent journalism.

When queried about digital strategies and adjustments to the business model interviewees from various Namibian media houses voiced a wide range of views, considerations, and approaches. All respondents however shared a common, underlying assessment that, while not always stated directly, shone through during each of their respective interviews, namely: the media industry is a highly challenging and unforgiving business environment. This was already demonstrated in the 2019 NMT/IPPR research; however, it had become a more dominant theme in discussions several years later.<sup>101</sup> Hence, when speaking about digitalisation, the pandemic and other challenges to their industry, media representatives underscored the need to strike a careful balance between managing daily operations, exploring new products and making their businesses' viable for the future. In this regard it was striking that many interviewees from the press emphasised that their priority was to ensure sound finance and the profitability of their operations.

For example, Frank Steffen of NMH stated that he could not just concern himself with creating content and editorial questions; rather, his role in management entailed additional responsibilities towards his staff and overall business of a financial nature that could not be ignored. Thus, he argued that, as an editor, he also needed to ensure that "the paper works" from a business perspective.<sup>102</sup> Speaking on behalf of *The Namibian*, Tangeni Amupadhi spoke at length about the difficult choices that the media house had to make over the past years. Voluntary retrenchments, restructuring, hiring freelancers in lieu of experienced journalists; these examples he stated, were undertaken out of financial necessity. Amupadhi also acknowledged the importance of news and journalistic work but stated irrevocably that "somebody has to pay for it" which in Namibia had become increasingly more challenging.<sup>103</sup> NEPC's Christof Maletsky appeared slightly less concerned about profitability. While noting that his company had less room to experiment due to being mandated by law to produce a physical newspaper, the NEPC CEO affirmed that growing overall revenue and focusing on monetizing their digital content was also a priority for *New Era*.<sup>104</sup>

Gary Stroebel of Future Media voiced his understanding and sympathy with local newspapers' financial predicament. From a business perspective, he stated that the digital transformation had forced print media to "cannibalize" their core business: the creation and sale of news and other journalistic content. In other words, the creation of new digital products occurred at the expense of the print version. Furthermore, digital news content from newspapers often failed to generate meaningful revenue and recuperate costs. By contrast, Stroebel argued that radio was better placed to take advantage of digitalisation since the creation of new products would not happen at the expense of the station and needed fewer extra resources. Furthermore, radio could easily self-promote its own new products at no expense unlike print, which still had to account for printing costs.<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless, he felt that traditional broadcast radio had perhaps 10 years of relevancy left. This time window needs to be used constructively in order for Future Media to position itself in the digital space in such a way to remain a viable business, he stated.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Deselaers Peter. DW Akademie Namibia office, Windhoek. June 13, 2022.

<sup>101</sup> Remmert, 12-3.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>103</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Maletsky Christof.

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



## 10. Financial Woes vs Quality Journalism: A Matter of Perspective

Of significant concern in this discussion is the clear perception that at least for some legacy media houses, quality hard-news and journalism has taken a backseat. This reflects a long-held and much reiterated concern by UNESCO and others that digitalisation is a crisis for journalism. This concern is particularly warranted where journalism is conceptualised as a 'public good' responsible for the delivery of independent, trustworthy, accessible and affordable information, which is crucial to a well-functioning democratic society.<sup>107</sup>

Internationally more print publications as well as many online news houses are placing content behind paywalls and offer access via subscriptions or membership payment models to consumers. These media companies are striving to reduce their reliance on digital advertising and to monetise their digital offerings better to remain financially viable and secure their existence. Interestingly, some news brands have done so during the pandemic including News24 in South Africa. UNESCO has expressed concerns with this trend, noting that paywalls make online news media exclusionary and accessible only to a more elite audience, transforming it from a public to a private good. Especially when coupled with weak and politically compromised PSM, this kind of media environment could degrade the role of independent journalism in society.<sup>108</sup> Such conditions could lead to an increased incidence wherein communities and their residents find it very difficult to access affordable and trusted information:

"Sometimes communities are deprived of trusted information sources as a result of market failure, when local newspapers go out of business due to a lack of advertising revenue. Citizens are left with "news deserts", where there are no local sources of trustworthy news. These news deserts have been identified in multiple regions, including Latin America and the Caribbean and Europe and North America, with almost one in five people living in such areas in some countries."<sup>109</sup>

For this study's interviewees, the 'journalism crisis' plays out mostly in two aspects: the quality of journalism or news reporting and media access. NUST academic Philip Santos, *The Namibian's* Tangeni Amupadhi and Gary Stroebel of Future Media broadly agreed that the standard of journalism produced by Namibia's legacy media had declined. However, *Allgemeine Zeitung's* Frank Steffen and DW Akademie's Peter Deselaers had a more differentiated view of the quality of journalistic content; for the latter, while quality journalism had arguably declined, local media houses still had the ability to undertake decent investigative reporting. Quality investigative journalism was also said to be further strengthened by Namibia's largely conducive media environment, especially when compared to other countries in the region where press freedom was oftentimes severely limited.<sup>110</sup>

### - Contested measures of quality journalism

For Steffen, a quality newspaper was defined by more factors than just high journalistic standards. Therefore, while retrenchments of journalists might affect the quality of a paper, quality could also be degraded by reduced number of pages. Quality, he argued, also had to take into account readers news consumption habits and preferences. Thus, he felt many of his papers' readers appreciated short and factual stories that were not split across two or more pages. To that end, Steffen suggested that published content had to be relevant to the audience and not just be a matter of filling pages.<sup>111</sup> For his part, Amupadhi acknowledged that costs cuts including retrenchments had hurt his papers' journalistic content. He noted that critics lamented that the newsroom had been "juniorized" with the loss of older, more experienced journalists. He argued that this was simply the reality of the industry since qualified and well-experienced staff could often earn a better salary outside of the media. However, he noted that the paper sought to keep such expertise available on a freelance basis. Moreover, the company conducted a lot of in-house training for junior staff via its internship unit whose programme trained around 20 staff per annum.<sup>112</sup>

According to Stroebel, the quality of news reporting in Namibia has been dropping for the past 20 years to the detriment of journalism. However, he offers a caveat to this negative assessment. Echoing *Allgemeine Zeitung's* Steffen, the Future Media CEO suggested that quality is context-dependent, noting that for Namibia's media, focusing on local news is an advantage with regards to attracting and retaining audiences. In this regard, Steffen indicated that quality was less important; in the case of compact news stories that are relevant to local communities, writers have more leeway in reporting news of a basically acceptable quality and standard. Conversely, he argued that the decline of quality news reporting by local TV stations and newspapers has actually been advantageous to radio broadcasters. This is because print and TV have lowered the benchmark for quality news reporting, making it easier for radio to catch up to other media mediums with regards to minimum reporting standards.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>107</sup> UNESCO, 23-4.

<sup>108</sup> UNESCO, 21-2.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.



## **DARK CLOUDS, SILVER LININGS: MEDIA VIABILITY AND GROWTH IN NAMIBIA**

The positions of both Steffen and Strobel that quality journalism is context-dependent and debatable dovetails with the UNESCO media trends report, which notes that what constitutes quality is subjective and therefore hard to quantify and compare. Nevertheless, the international organisation also observes that better reporting standards and ethics over the past decades have led to overall higher quality in journalism. This progress is however now under threat especially for legacy media houses.<sup>114</sup>

The subjective opinion of this study's author is that the quality of Namibia's news reporting has definitely declined over recent years, particularly among local newspapers. To be clear, what constitutes high-level, 'quality' journalism is debatable for various reasons. What however is evident is that much general news-reporting is often hampered by little fact-checking, poor phrasing and limited use of identifiable sources. This is most concerning as poor reporting standards contribute greatly to confusion, lack of understanding and mistrust among the general public. Particularly since the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020, media monitoring conducted by the 'Namibia Fact Check' initiative has documented numerous mistakes in news reports by both private and government-owned legacy media houses. One monitoring summary published in April 2021 observes:

"Namibian media continue to make mistakes that can contribute to complicating and confusing the communication around the COVID-19 vaccines, and some have even been complicit in spreading anti-vaccine falsehoods and conspiracy theories."<sup>115</sup>

The summary notes further that inaccurate, badly worded news posts are often found in social media channels and posted on the official sites by well-known mainstream legacy media brands including NBC, *New Era* and *Namibian Sun*, a daily published by NMH.<sup>116</sup>

### - Media access challenges

Ensuring convenient access to trustworthy news media by the public was the second issue raised by local interviewees in relation to the journalism crisis. This issue is linked to the concept of news deserts discussed earlier in this study. In this regard however, media access speaks more to demography and living conditions of the readers themselves and the ease with which these conditions allow them to access media news and information. Such conditions in and of themselves often serve as barriers to media access which are hard for media businesses to address regardless of their financial and operational make-up. One key barrier is the lack of easy and affordable access to the internet, particularly in developing countries. According to data from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) internet coverage has expanded greatly over the past decade from around 30 % of the world's population in 2010 to 50 % in 2020. In addition, increased high-bandwidth cables and improved mobile networks have made accessing the World Wide Web more affordable and available across most Regions.<sup>117</sup> However, a recent UNESCO report notes that:

"Despite the technological gains, over the last five years, the growth of internet access has slowed as markets struggle to provide service to the world's poorest populations and amid enduring digital divides in some regions, evident in disparities based on issues such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, and urban-rural divides, among others."<sup>118</sup>

The African continent in particular is lagging behind in terms of universal internet access and has the highest cost for data in comparison to all other Regions. Women on the continent are also less likely to own a mobile phone and make use of it to go online.<sup>119</sup> The ITU estimates that only 33 % of people in Africa made use of the internet in 2021 compared to the worldwide average of 63 %.<sup>120</sup>

It is not exactly clear what proportion of Namibia's population access the internet on a regular basis. The latest available CRAN annual report from 2020, states that 73 % and 37.7 % of the population are currently covered by 3G and 4G networks respectively.<sup>121</sup> Yet internet capable network coverage does not equal the number of citizens who actually access the internet. Some interviewees referred to these issues when talking about the digital revolution. According to Steffen from *Allgemeine Zeitung*, many areas of Namibia still lack adequate network coverage which mitigates against significant and rapid investment in digital content.<sup>122</sup> Similarly, DW Akademie's Deselaers

<sup>114</sup> UNESCO, 35.

<sup>115</sup> Namibia Fact Check. "Media mistakes and conspiracy platforming." April 29, 2021. <https://namibiafactcheck.org.na/news-item/media-mistakes-and-conspiracy-platforming/>

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> UNESCO, 61.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>119</sup> UNESCO, 63.

<sup>120</sup> ITU. Measuring digital development Facts and figures 2021. 2. 2021. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/FactsFigures2021.pdf>

<sup>121</sup> CRAN. CRAN Annual Report 2020. 47. n. d. <https://www.cran.na/ygllilidy/2021/09/CRAN-Annual-Report-2020-Web.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

stated that for both internet and radio signals there continues to exist big gaps across the country. Large parts of Omaheke Region, for example, lacked reception for NBC radio.<sup>123</sup>

Media representatives were also acutely aware of the costs associated with reaching a fairly small market like Namibia. As the country's population is small, it requires a significant up-front investment in digital technology for reaching a comparatively small amount of people, many of whom cannot afford legacy media's products in the first place. Stroebel from Future Media, stated that the stations upgrade of radio broadcasting equipment to keep up with digitalisation, entailed high fixed cost that had to be paid in US Dollars.<sup>124</sup> Deselaers and Steffen also alluded to the high cost of availing media content in digital formats to a small and dispersed population.<sup>125 126</sup>

Finally, some interviewees focused on banking issues. According to Amupadhi, it was very hard for Namibians to access online content simply because many of them were unbanked or lacked affordable and easy to the necessary financial tools to make payments online. He argued that if for example citizens had easy access to a cheap mobile-phone based money transfer service like Kenya's M-Pesa, more people would be willing to pay for news.<sup>127</sup> Deselaers agreed with this point, adding that high banking fees acted as a further disincentive for potential customers of media content.<sup>128</sup>

- *An issue of trust*

Perhaps more concerning from a business perspective is the loss of trust by audiences in news media content. Undoubtedly, sloppy reporting and factual mistakes in news stories can and do raise mistrust among consumers of media products. Heightened distrust of media houses amongst key audience demographics is bad for business as distrust is a clear disincentive to buy, use and engage with a brand's products. Growing distrust in traditional media institutions is further compounded by the deluge of misinformation easily posted and spread on social media channels.

Information on the level of trust that Namibians have in news media is limited. There are however datapoints that should cause worry in the industry. According to the latest Afrobarometer survey from late 2019, 62 % of respondents blamed news media and journalists as the source of fake news often or sometimes.<sup>129</sup> Natasja Beyleveld, the Managing Director of NaMedia, a local media monitoring company, noted that her businesses' research indicated that Namibian audiences were concerned about the authenticity of media news. She further noted that poor communication and an information gap on the part of authorities at the beginning of the pandemic lead to a vacuum of factual information which it seems was oftentimes filled by disinformation.<sup>130</sup> A briefing paper on the 'disinfectomic' published by IPPR in July 2020 mirrors Beyleveld's observation, adding that this appears to have caused "declining trust in official sources" among local media consumers.<sup>131</sup>

Some media representatives however see a silver lining regarding the perceived loss of trust by local audiences in legacy media. For example, Stroebel is convinced that while TV and newspapers have lost brand loyalty, broadcast radio has managed to retain trust among most listeners. He argues that for his company, this presents an ideal opportunity to create new digital products which, when attached to existing and valued brands, can tie in consumers.<sup>132</sup>

The apparent decline of public trust in legacy media brands opens up space for businesses to produce news-oriented media products that can fill the gap. A case in point is *The Brief*, an online, weekday newsletter. Roadwin Chiara, a managing partner of the newsletter states that his business identified a gap in the media industry; namely, providing sober, factual news to Namibia's business community – a niche market. Chiara further emphasised that *The Brief* aims to serve its readers with fact-based, credible news on business and the economy. *The Brief*, he said, had established a high bar for itself in terms of presenting quality, well researched information to its readers,<sup>133</sup> summarising his publication's goal with the following statement: "...if businesspeople see it [a breaking story] in *The Brief* – they trust it to be true."<sup>134</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>126</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>127</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>128</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>129</sup> Keulder, Christiaan. Free vs. false: Namibia's changing media landscape presents tough choices for citizens. Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 342. 5-6. February 14, 2020.

<sup>130</sup> Interview with Beyleveld, Natasja.

<sup>131</sup> Links Frederico. Countering the 'Disinfectomic': Namibian Social Media1 & COVID-19 disinformation. IPPR. n. p. July 2020.

<https://ippr.org.na/publication/countering-the-disinfectomic/>

<sup>132</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>133</sup> Interview with Chiara, Roadwin. *The Brief*, Windhoek. June 21, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.



# DARK CLOUDS, SILVER LININGS: MEDIA VIABILITY AND GROWTH IN NAMIBIA

## 11. Entering the Digital Sphere: Experiences & Strategy

### - Collaborations & Mergers

What have Namibia's media houses experienced and how have they adjusted their strategies pertaining to digitalisation since the outbreak of the pandemic? It is evident that local media houses have not stood still since Covid-19 shook-up their traditional business models. For example, NMH and *The Namibian* have launched new media products to attract audiences and generate revenue.

Media businesses have also increased their collaborations with each other in an effort to cut costs, expand their news content, appeal to a wider audience and/or build their brands. Synergy can be achieved in various ways and may include engaging in multiple channels across both digital and traditional mediums. Cooperation between media houses in Namibia is nothing new; economic headwinds, a crowded media market as well as the impact of Covid-19 in recent years have pushed more media businesses to search for synergies to reduce costs, increase efficiencies and make their products more appealing by promoting them across multiple channels including on-line. Indeed, it appears that there has been a glut of collaborations between both private and state-owned media houses. This trend was also referenced during the author's interview with Peter Deselaers from DW Akademie.<sup>135</sup> The print-dominated NMH, for example, launched a TV channel in collaboration with Multichoice Namibia at the start of 2022.<sup>136</sup> Multichoice is a large South African-based media company that broadcasts a host of TV channels over its entertainment platforms to paying subscribers in 50 countries.<sup>137</sup> Stroebel of Future Media judges this collaboration as advantageous to NMH and its advertising clients, noting that Multichoice's DSTV entertainment platform is well placed to cross-promote various products and services cheaply using its own channels to a large, multi-country audience.<sup>138</sup>

Future Media itself resulted from a merger of FM radio station Radiowave with Planet Radio and its stations Omulunga Radio and Fresh FM in early 2019.<sup>139</sup> All FM stations were already well-established brands in their own right prior to the merger, forming a strong basis for Future Media. Industry consolidation utilising mergers to weather difficult market conditions is a common and accepted business practice. CEO Gary Stroebel cautions however that achieving successful mergers is challenging, owing to the fact that Namibia's commercial radio stations owners tend to be very independent, unlike South African stations. Nevertheless, he foresees more media mergers on the horizon for Namibia in order to create multi-media companies such as TribeFire Studios which also owns the country's only private TV station, One Africa.<sup>140 141</sup>

Mergers are unpopular with media workers as they go hand in hand with staff cuts and the rationalising of resources. In spite of government's strained fiscal position over the past years Namibia's PSM has so far avoided painful mergers. In March 2021, Cabinet approved a plan to merge NEPC and the Namibia Press Agency (NAMPA). The latter organisation has in the past spent lavishly on its head office in Windhoek and has been criticised for the size of its management. Telling in this regard was that the merger proposal came from the Ministry of Finance.<sup>142</sup> Little is known of the current state of the merger and it appears that it has been shelved for now. Indeed, government has improved the financial allocations for both media entities for the 2023/24 financial year.<sup>143</sup>

Cooperation between media houses also extends to operational aspects, which are likely easier to set-up than collaborations around media content and mediums, primarily as a means to reduce costs, constituting a crucial survival strategy for legal media during the pandemic. A case in point is the cooperation between *The Namibian* newspaper, NMH, and NEPC to arrange joint transport and distribution of newspaper hardcopies across the country. According to Frank Steffen from the *Allgemeine Zeitung*, this started around mid-2020. This arrangement (which NEPC joined at a later stage) is clearly beneficial to the media houses.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>135</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>136</sup> Rasmeni, Mandisa. "NMH launches new television channel in collaboration with Multichoice Namibia." *Namibia Economist*. February 9, 2022. <https://economist.com.na/67971/after-hours/nmh-launches-new-television-channel-in-collaboration-with-multichoice-namibia/>

<sup>137</sup> See: <https://www.multichoice.com/about-us>

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>139</sup> Shikage Wetumwene "Stroebel – A Powerful Leader." *My Zone*. April 30, 2021. <https://zone.my.na/news/stroebel-a-powerful-leader2021-04-30>

<sup>140</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>141</sup> See: <https://tribefirestudiosnam.com/>

<sup>142</sup> Namene John-Colin & Ikelia Sakeus. "Cabinet approves New Era, Nampa 'marriage'." *The Namibian*. March 24, 2021. <https://www.namibian.com.na/209925/archive-read/Cabinet-approves-New-Era-Nampa-marriage>

<sup>143</sup> Amukeshe Lazerus. "Nampa, New Era budget allocations at N\$54 million." *The Namibian*. March 13, 2023. <https://namibian.com.na/nampa-new-era-budget-allocations-at-n54-million/>

<sup>144</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

## - New Media Products &amp; Services

Besides increasing collaborations, Namibia's media houses placed more emphasis on experimenting and launching new media products during the course of the pandemic. The pandemic can be characterised as a determined push for legacy media to confront the digitalisation challenge in earnest and to become truly innovative, multimedia businesses. Peter Deselaers from DW Akademie notes that large media houses like *The Namibian* are well placed to do so as they already possess much of the required equipment such as cameras and other related apparatus for producing multimedia content.<sup>145</sup> On the face of it, this is a commendable strategy on the part of the country's media houses which should place them in better financial and operational positions to respond to the challenges of digitalisation. It is also a positive development following the publication of the NMT/IPPR study in 2019, which raised concern about the perceived slow pace and reluctance by Namibia's media houses to experiment and invest in new media formats and products.<sup>146</sup>

Yet few if any local media representatives seem genuinely enthused by this development. Many respondents spoke about the need to proceed very carefully and deliberately when making investment decisions around the type and format of new media products. This approach from managers at legacy media houses dovetails well with concerns about ensuring the overall financial viability of the respective business, discussed earlier (See Section 9) in this report.

Indications of how challenging media managers have found it to pilot ideas and establish successful, profitable products became evident when interviewees spoke about podcasting. For media companies and publishers in the West, podcasts have grown in importance over the past years as a regular way to engage consumers and specifically younger people.<sup>147</sup> DW Akademie's Peter Deselaers, said that podcasts were a great format to cheaply re-package existing information into new content to attract audiences and sponsors.<sup>148</sup> In contrast, the Editor of *The Namibian*, stated that when it came to new products, including podcasts "ideas are easy to generate". He noted that turning an idea into a viable product that would hopefully also be profitable, required money and staff which were in short supply.<sup>149</sup> Stroebel from Future Media, echoed Amupadhi's concerns arguing that while experimenting with new digital products was imperative for media houses, it also had to make business sense. Furthermore, he reiterated that experimentation with new products had to be tied into a thoughtful strategy. For his company, Future Media, ideas that could be implemented had to really link and add value to their existing brands. With regards to podcasts Stroebel was sceptical about the format's commercial potential given the small size of the local market.<sup>150</sup>

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Speaking more generally about media products, NMH's Frank Steffen felt that it was important to reflect on a media house's history and the make-up of its core audience and how their preferences might change over time. Regarding his own newspaper, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, he argued that the paper had to work hard to prove its editorial independence in the post-independence era; and, as a consequence, editors had to be extra sensitive in their news coverage and advertising choices. The paper's aim is to "cover news from extreme right to left and all in-between" for the German-speaking community in Namibia, a stance that underscores his earlier statement about prioritising fact-based news reporting.<sup>151</sup>

Speaking about *The Namibian's* Desert Radio venture, Amupadhi noted that it is part of the company's digital strategy and was initially only intended as an online station.<sup>152</sup> However, it was decided to also avail Desert Radio as an analogue radio frequency, adding weight to the media house's intention of "becoming a comprehensive multimedia company".<sup>153</sup> *The Namibian* and Desert Radio, he noted, had a strong presence on social media platforms which is evident in their large number of followers and engagements. However, such a following has not yet translated into financial benefit for the business.<sup>154</sup> Thus, Desert Radio should serve as an attractive, direct advertising carrier for clients covering both online and FM.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>146</sup> Remmert, 35-6.

<sup>147</sup> Newman Nic, et al. 20 & 8. 2022.

<sup>148</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.

<sup>149</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>150</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>152</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>153</sup> Tendane, Sophie. "Desert Radio 'an oasis of information'." *The Namibian*. October 8, 2021.

<https://www.namibian.com.na/6214124/archive-read/Desert-Radio-an-oasis-of-information>

<sup>154</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.



## **DARK CLOUDS, SILVER LININGS: MEDIA VIABILITY AND GROWTH IN NAMIBIA**

Speaking on behalf of Future Media, Gary Stroebel indicated that the development and implementation of their Corona Watch Bulletin was in direct response to an identified gap in the market, namely the lack of brief, factual and up-to-date news on the pandemic. He noted that such a news segment would not have worked for just one of their stations such as the more entertainment orientated RadioWave channel. Availing it across all the company's radio stations, however, made sense giving the pervasiveness of the Covid-19 health emergency and its impact across all strata of society and therefore listeners.<sup>155</sup> CEO Stroebel said the Corona news segment had been a striking success; creating positive brand identification and quickly securing corporate sponsorship. Furthermore, he argued that the bulletin's reception among audiences also raised Future Media's general news profile, "putting them on the map" so to speak. Indeed, prior to the bulletin, Future Media's news team found it difficult to get comments and 'soundbites' from senior people in government and business but after the bulletin's release, this situation was reversed to the benefit of the business.<sup>156</sup>

Future Media also decided to strengthen its news coverage by investing in extra staff and the generation of news content. This development was primarily in response to the perceived decline of quality news coverage by Namibia's media during the course of the pandemic. Stroebel also felt that news has remained an important component of radio as a medium.<sup>157</sup> Meanwhile, reflecting on his company's experience with Desert Radio, Amupadhi said the station had garnered a large audience among 18- to 25-year-olds, based on *The Namibian's* own research and surveys. This had come as a surprise as their intended target market was initially 25- to 45-year-olds.<sup>158</sup> This development supports the view that social media and the internet in general are growing in importance as a news source in Namibia, particularly for younger audiences.

However, Amupadhi also noted that selling Desert Radio to advertising clients had had limited success, with sales growth "frustratingly slow." Their E-paper product for paid subscribers, which was already available prior to the pandemic, had seen positive growth at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. *The Namibian* had also invested in the development of an App which would bundle most of their digital products into one package, available via the Android Playstore and Apple Store. According to Amupadhi, this would be advantageous from a business perspective since *The Namibian* would own the App.<sup>159</sup>

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### *- Focus on Formats, Audiences & Local Content*

The pandemic also pushed legacy media houses to experiment with different formats and approaches to presenting media content. In addition, media representatives acknowledged the need to appeal to younger audiences and to create more local content. *The Namibian*, for example, placed more feature type articles on the front cover. Amupadhi stated that this was done to personalise news stories more and to make newspaper content more engaging for the readership as people did not want to consume hard news exclusively.<sup>160</sup> Frank Steffen was also supportive of this approach. He felt that readers also increasingly preferred visual elements in a story, particularly for NMH's Tourism Magazine wherein it was often better to tell a story through high-quality, prominent pictures and to keep the descriptive text to a minimum. Moreover, he stated that presenting information in illustrated graphs and charts, a form of 'data journalism', was a good way to present business, economic and financial news to readers, noting that NMH's business insert Business 7 did this successfully. He cautioned however that the visual representation of news and related information required local media workers to develop skills in this area.<sup>161</sup>

Dr Phillip Santos, an academic at NUST, and Natasja Beyleveld, Managing Director of NaMedia, also agreed that shifting editorial focus towards features and human-interest stories was a promising approach for Namibia's legacy media. According to Santos, legacy media's main challenge was to remain relevant to audiences, thus more personalised news that reflected ordinary people's experiences might be better placed to engage audiences as opposed to exclusively covering hard news stories.<sup>162</sup> Beyleveld further pointed out that publishing more feature stories was also supported by NaMedia's own audience metrics. Indeed, she stated that many people and especially younger generations had become disinterested and fatigued by media's "pure hard news focus". Human-interest stories also had the ability to put an engaging spotlight on serious local social issues in Namibia such as Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and poverty.<sup>163</sup> It is notable that this information corresponds to recent international findings highlighting a growing disengagement from hard news (See Info Box 2).

<sup>155</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with Santos, Phillip. NUST, Windhoek. June 9, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> Interview with Beyleveld, Natasja

These international findings also resonated among Namibian media representatives. Specifically, global surveys found that young people under 30 years of age were increasingly turning away from news consumption and were therefore proving to be an ever-harder demographic to reach (See Info Box 2). NEPC CEO Christof Maletsky, *The Namibian's* Tangeni Amupadhi and Frank Steffen from NMH all underscored the need for their respective media houses to engage more with younger audiences. They all said that their respective companies had to work more effectively to understand younger people's media use habits and preferences and to improve their offerings for the youth.

Maletsky said NEPC has made significant progress in rejigging the *New Era* newspaper to appeal to a younger readership. The core of NEPC's concern was said to be the preconception among the public that the publication was very much a government mouthpiece appealing to and being read by mostly older people. The paper's management wanted to do away with this preconception by drawing in a younger readership, conducting an image make-over, and promoting digital media content at the same stage. Having assumed the NEPC's CEO position just prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, Maletsky indicated that he had taken steps to revamp operations, getting rid of the company's top-heavy management structure and hiring experienced, independent-minded journalists as news editors. To appeal to a younger audience, *New Era* also started to feature more youth-orientated content such as opinion pieces on current affairs drafted by younger bloggers and writers. In the same vein, the paper raised the quality of its content and began providing 24-hour news coverage via its online channels.

Maletsky said that these efforts have lowered the average age of their readership by 20 years, thereby "rejuvenating" the newspaper.<sup>164</sup> As evidence of this development, the CEO pointed to the significant increase in comments, likes and other types of engagement with online articles posted on social media, often by younger readers. The paper's strategy is to build a larger, younger audience, which should be attractive for advertising clients and translate into increasing numbers of subscribers.<sup>165</sup>

Amupadhi's interview responses indicated that his media house had not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to engage a younger audiences. He did however state that *The Namibian's* younger readership accessed the paper more via digital platforms. In light of this trend, he felt that the media house's journalists and sales team had to think critically about how to enhance their relationship with this audience while also improving the overall competitiveness of the company's products.<sup>166</sup>

Few media representatives mentioned specifics around news focusing on local content. Yet, this strategy has been touted internationally as a possible saving grace for smaller, community-based media houses for whom practising strong branding and meticulous reporting on local political issues could prove positive for revenue generation. Indeed, Gary Stroebel was one of few media representatives who emphasised in his interview responses that Namibia's legacy media's insights and ability to report on local news and issues was a clear advantage but needed to be harnessed cleverly. For example, linkages could be established between radio and newspaper coverage: while the former would break the news, creating interest among audiences, the latter would be best placed to maintain audience interest by providing deeper analysis and background information.<sup>167</sup> Such an approach would however require a strongly collaborative foundation to be established between different print and broadcast businesses or across separate departments in the case of one company.

Dr Phillip Santos expressed doubts about the usefulness of this approach, pointing out that big international news organisations such as BBC and Al Jazeera were increasingly putting out locally relevant news content as well provided by stringers, with the key difference being that such content is polished and well-presented unlike much of the parallel content featured on NBC which, Santos argued, acted as a disincentive for local audiences.<sup>168</sup>

Finally, Peter Deselaers from DW Akademie noted that local content presented an opportunity for legacy media to broaden their appeal and serve additional audiences. He felt that content could especially be created around educational and cultural topics, which could be tailored to specific audiences and language groups. For larger media outlets who were more likely to cover cultural events in any case, targeted efforts and investment could produce a range of additional content in this regard. This content could then be packaged into podcasts, digital audio clips or simple online newsletters distributed via common messaging applications. Modest sponsorships could also make such products viable and attract more clients.<sup>169</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Interview with Maletsky Christof.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Stroebel Gary.

<sup>168</sup> Interview with Santos, Phillip.

<sup>169</sup> Interview with Deselaers, Peter.



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### **12. Advertising Developments: Contradictions**

Detailed information on the role and weight of advertising in Namibia's media industry remains limited and patchy – an issue already highlighted by UNESCO in a regional context.<sup>170</sup> Nevertheless, revenue from advertising clients, especially large corporates such as banks and big retailers, undoubtedly remains critical to the financial sustainability of local legacy media. Due to the limited available data, this section will only highlight a few comments made by interviewees on this aspect. As aforementioned in earlier sections, Christof Maletsky argued that NEPC received only a small slice of government support and advertising spend, thus placing it more on par with commercial media houses in terms of its business model.<sup>171</sup> While this assertion may be true, especially in light of the central government's constrained finances; the general assumption is that state-owned media can always rely on state support to stave off bankruptcy. A recent media situational analysis undertaken by the African Media Barometer (AMB) and published in 2022, observed that:

"In Namibia, there are no specific measures taken by the government to protect small media outlets, and state media is prioritised with government advertising spending. ... Cabinet still has in place the 2015 policy that government and parastatal advertising must first go to state-owned media"<sup>172</sup>

The AMB panel of local Namibian media experts expressed few insights into the size and make-up of the advertising market. Some panellists felt that the advertising market was insufficient to "sustain existing media outlets"; others however disagreed with this assessment.<sup>173</sup>

A core issue for local media representatives is the negative impact of digital media advertising on their media houses and revenue streams. Both NMT's Frank Steffen and NEPC's Christof Maletsky spoke about the difficulty of growing revenue from digital ads placed on social media platforms such as FB and Google Chrome.<sup>174</sup> The latter noted that while they were still in negotiations with Google, he was certain that they would only "get peanuts."<sup>175</sup> Although this is far from a novel experience internationally or for the country itself, it has however clearly become a much bigger worry for media managers than previously acknowledged in the 2019 NMT/IPPR study.<sup>176</sup> The Covid-19 emergency can perhaps be seen as a mixed blessing in this regard as local legacy media finally had to confront the existential challenge that digital ads posed to their business model, in earnest.

Indeed, Mare's master's thesis indicates that each of the three newspaper marketing managers interviewed for the study observed with grave concern that advertising clients were increasingly looking towards digital platforms to market their products and services.<sup>177</sup> On a positive note, newspaper sales departments made extra efforts to deploy innovative strategies to secure advertising sales. *The Namibian* for example increased its advertising rates while also offering tailored advertising products and bundles to clients during the pandemic.<sup>178</sup>

As the pandemic began to recede in 2022, some media representatives observed a counterintuitive trend in advertising. According to Tangeni Amupadhi, some clients were switching back to physical adverts or placing less emphasis on digital ads. These clients stated that, based on their sales figure, adverts in print copies proved to be more effective in driving sales. He noted that this was probably due to the individual advertising clients' target market. Even so, this experience placed renewed emphasis on the importance of tailoring adverts to customer demographics and income levels.<sup>179</sup> Meanwhile, Future Media's Gary Stroebel spoke at length about the international issue of 'digital fraud' within the advertising industry.<sup>180</sup> In a nutshell, this term defines the lack of transparency by big technology firms including Meta, Alphabet (owner of Google), and Amazon with respect to their digital advertising businesses. In essence, these firms sold advertising space as well as the analytics judging their effectiveness and impact. However, many global clients have become wary of this approach given the fact that there was no way to independently verify that their advertising funds had truly made the impact being outlined in the analytic data provided by big tech firms. In fact, various international sources have indicated that a significant amount of online adverts are never seen by a real person.<sup>181</sup>

<sup>170</sup> UNESCO, 113.

<sup>171</sup> Interview with Maletsky, Christof.

<sup>172</sup> FES & MISA. African Media Barometer, A home-grown analysis of the media landscape in Africa: Namibia 2022. 40. 2022. <https://fesmedia-africa.fes.de/media-and-publications/african-media-barometer-publications>

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>174</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>175</sup> Interview with Maletsky, Christof.

<sup>176</sup> Remmert, 20-1.

<sup>177</sup> Mare, 42.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 48-9.

<sup>179</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.

<sup>180</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>181</sup> Auty Louise. "How Ad Fraud Is Killing Your Marketing." *The Beacon*. March 21, 2022. <https://www.thisisbeacon.com/blog/click-fraud/ad-fraud-is-killing-your-marketing/>



Gary Stroebel – who was critical about the effectiveness of social media – felt that it was incumbent on media houses themselves to carefully re-think their own digital presence and advertising, perhaps by pushing their media products and services on the multiple channels that they controlled.<sup>182</sup> For NMH's Frank Steffen, the continued strength of physical print adverts was unique to Namibia and underscored the ongoing attractiveness of newspaper hardcopies to the country's readers. Therefore, printed ads were regarded as more valuable than digital advertising in the local context. He did also acknowledge that this was not expected to continue.<sup>183</sup>

For *The Brief's* Roadwin Chirara, his company was able to provide solid and transparent data on the reach of their product. The newsletter's emailed format and LinkedIn posts for example only provided story links to *The Brief's* website – traffic which could be easily tracked and measured. The number of followers and total views of individual online articles also gave an indication of total consumer numbers and which stories attracted most interest.<sup>184</sup>

On a final note, some media representatives cited various examples for how their respective media houses had tried to diversify their revenue streams and become less dependent on advertising. For example, Christof Maletsky stated that NEPC had started a streaming service in late 2021, whereby paying clients could have their events or ceremonies lived streamed on the *New Era's* FB page. He further stated that a local education institute had made use of this service to stream a graduation ceremony.<sup>185</sup> Meanwhile, *The Namibian* had produced a book detailing the Fishrot corruption scandal and how the media broke this story. The print run for the book had been sponsored and sales would generate additional income.<sup>186</sup>

### 13. Discussion & Conclusion

Covid-19 and worsening economic conditions over recent years have placed Namibia's legacy media houses in an unenviable position from a business perspective. With the ongoing challenges of digitalisation, the local media industry has seen an increase in media businesses downsizing or closing their operations. Better placed financially, larger media outfits such as NMH and *The Namibian*, also undertook cost-cutting measures. The need for new revenue streams has pushed most businesses to experiment more with new media products and services including digital formats. Thus, it can be argued that the industry's management has become more accepting of integrating digital news formats into their operations and defining themselves more as multimedia companies.

At the same time, editors, CEOs and senior staff members are aware of the difficulty of striking the right balance between different mediums and formats. Overall, it remains unclear what media package or format is most promising in terms of generating revenue and what will justify further investments in staff and resources. Subscription models or paywalls are usually not seen as appropriate for Namibia due to the small market. Moreover, it is notable that legacy media businesses are pursuing multimedia strategies; investing in traditional channels such as TV and radio, as well as creating new digital media products. This approach likely reflects a recognition that internationally, digital-only news media are also struggling financially.

It is also evident that new formats and products which work for one media business might not be suitable for another. International information provides little guidance in this regard; however, examples abound of individual media houses that have managed to open-up additional revenue streams by various ways and means. Thus, while both costly and risky, continued experimentation with formats and concepts remains a crucial strategy for Namibia's media industry.

Another lesson that seems to wind itself through Namibia's media management offices is the recognition that media houses will have to become smaller, more efficient, flexible and integrated to survive. They will have to rely on fewer staff and more freelancers, produce content for multiple channels and offer unorthodox services such as media production facilities to generate extra cash. Media businesses which are strongly integrated will be able to offer their audiences relevant, well-packaged and branded content across a number of media channels; furthermore, they are more likely to possess a pro-active sales department closely linked with the editorial team. Re-structuring exercises among some media houses are arguably an attempt to shape such new, more resilient operations.

<sup>182</sup> Interview with Stroebel, Gary.

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Steffen, Frank.

<sup>184</sup> Interview with Chiara, Roadwin.

<sup>185</sup> Interview with Maletsky, Christof.

<sup>186</sup> Interview with Amupadhi, Tangeni.



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At the same time, editors and managers of media houses are wary of the often painful disruptions to operations and staff morale that re-structuring and transformational processes entail. Few however seem to have a plan as to how best to deal with these uncertainties within the newsrooms. Intense strategising around new products and investments, training and consultations with younger staff on editorial decisions seem for now the standard response. Pushing the involvement of young media workers is a positive development; while most still lack experience and business acumen, they are likely more familiar with the digital realm and have better insights into their peers' news media preferences.

For newspapers especially, these are sobering times and many observers are rightly concerned about the survival of quality and public interest orientated journalism which underpins press freedom. Editors and media owners would do well to focus on how reporting standards can be improved including exploring ways to fund and strengthen journalistic work in the long term. Worldwide there is an increasing impetus to push states, international donors and global businesses to explore funding mechanisms that could be established to pay for independent journalism and PSM. UNESCO for example is calling for the implementation of policies and regulations to support journalism with options including taxing tech companies, introducing tax incentives for media houses, and increased development funding.<sup>187</sup>

These policies will however require increased regional and global cooperation between states – Namibia's poor state finances and small economy cannot hope to implement such policies independently. A dedicated fund to finance and sustain independent journalistic work supported by international institutions and corporates for Southern Africa could be a viable solution. Regardless of such consideration, stakeholders in Namibia's media industry including civil society should continue to support press freedom principles and fight for an independent PSM. The country will see a new government in power in the not-so-distant future and any possible shifts towards a more restrictive media environment must be called out and resisted.

Finally, it is positive to note that the country is seeing the tentative development of new media start-ups. These businesses are small, and their resources and reach limited. However, they also offer an opportunity to provide innovative news formats such as electronic newsletters that are cost-effective and easily distributed. New media business models which utilise cheap equipment and focus on local content for specific communities also offer opportunities to newcomers to the market such as non-profits, fact-check projects or educational institutions. If such media ventures can prove themselves financially viable and guarantee an independent, fact-based source of public information, they can offer a new avenue of re-imagining media businesses and the provision of trustworthy journalism in Namibia.

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**Table 1: Key Informant Interviewees**

#	Name	Position & Organisation
1	Christof Maletsky	CEO - New Era Publication Corporation
2	Frank Steffen	Editor - Allgemeine Zeitung (NMH) & EFN Chairperson
3	Gary Stroebel	CEO - Future Media Holdings (Pty) Ltd.
4	Natasja Beyleveld	Managing Director - NaMedia Pty Ltd.
5	Peter Deselaers	Programme Director, Namibia- DW Akademie
6	Phillip Santos	Senior Lecturer - Namibia University of Science & Technology
7	Tangeni Amupadhi	Editor-in-Chief - The Namibian
8	Roadwin Chirara	Managing Partner - The Brief

<sup>187</sup> UNESCO, 38, 42-3.

**Recommended Further Reading**

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## About the Author

Dietrich Remmert is an IPPR Research Associate and has worked intermittently for the institute on a range of research projects since 2004. He holds a Master's degree in Peace Studies and International Politics from the Eberhard Karls University in Tübingen, Germany. Remmert has over a decade of wide-ranging experience in the public sector, predominantly in the field of health and communication, education, as well as foreign and public policy analysis. He has written on the issues of water governance and climate change for the IPPR. In addition, he has led research projects on housing policy, China-Namibia relations, and fiscal transparency for the institute. He wrote the 2019 IPPR study, Namibia's Media: Facing the Digital Challenge to which this paper is a sequel.

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Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)  
House of Democracy  
70-72 Frans Indongo Street  
PO Box 6566  
Windhoek, Namibia  
info@ippr.org.na  
<http://www.ippr.org.na>

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Hanns Seidel Foundation Namibia  
House of Democracy  
70-72 Dr Frans Indongo Street  
PO Box 90912  
Windhoek, Namibia  
info@hsf.org.na  
<https://namibia.hss.de/>

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