Levelling the media playing field: lessons from South Africa

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Summary

This report considers the effectiveness of a range of policy measures that were instituted around the start of South Africa's democracy to "level the playing field" by encouraging the development of media outlets servicing communities on the margins of the information ecosystem. The country's democracy was founded some 30 years ago and was associated with a strong drive to improve access and participation in the media, particularly by groups that had been excluded under apartheid.

A policy framework was created for community broadcasting, and though much less formal attention was paid to print, circumstances proved favourable to significant growth in independent publishing. The report first considers the policy interventions and adjustments that were put in place and then describes the current local media landscape, finding significant growth but also continuing deep inequality in information access, chronic instability and a commercial model that is unable fully to redress inequalities.

An assessment of the policy measures follows, finding that policy and implementation have been undermined by political shifts and institutional weaknesses. An idealised view of community has led to a lack of measures to manage conflict and prevent capture, while resourcing strategies have paid too little attention to the weakness of local economies while there has been too little focus on the role of government communication spending.

A series of recommendations conclude the report, under the umbrella suggestion of a policy on information rights.

This would include:

- looking at existing policies, practices and institutions to the extent to which they serve the needs of those still on the margins of the information ecosystem. The policy should investigate opportunities in the market and the state for better support for independent local media. Relevant institutions need to be fit for purpose.
- targeted use of government communication spending, with a new framework to ensure it is fairly and transparently used
- a Basic Income Grant (BIG) for media on the furthest edges of the information ecosystem.

Overall, the impact of socio-economic marginalisation on media projects serving poor communities emerges as an important factor in Global South media landscapes. The South African case, where a concerted intervention into the media landscape was confronted with particularly extreme inequality, surfaces important issues that many other countries also confront.

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01
Introduction

With the end of apartheid, South Africa had the chance to create a new society founded on the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. The release of Nelson Mandela at the start of 1990 marked the beginning of the transition toward democracy, even though the first democratic election did not occur until 1994. As in other countries, the transition offered a rare opportunity to rethink institutions and practices, "a task that has no clear path, destination or timeline."[1]

An early priority was reform of the media, which had played an important role in sustaining apartheid. It was important to ensure that elections could be held freely and that citizens could participate in political discussion. There was much to address.

Until then, journalists had been tightly controlled and reporting was heavily circumscribed. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) played a central role, being run by the governing National Party as a propaganda service. Apartheid ideology was built into the very structure of the broadcaster: separate services targeted the various ethnic groups with content designed to cement separate identities.[2] There was no independent broadcasting, though some initiatives, both commercially and politically motivated, made minor inroads from outside the country.

In print, four large corporations were dominant, two of them associated with English mining capital and two with the Afrikaans elite. The political positions of the main newspapers ranged from full-throttle support for apartheid to cautious reformism.[3] In the 1980s, as domestic and international opposition to the system grew, a feisty clutch of alternative media sprang up, finding ways to circumvent the state's attempts at information control and publishing important exposes.[4]

News deserts were extensive: access to media closely mirrored the sharp gap between rich and poor. Wealthier urban audiences, mostly white, had access to a range of media, from magazines to pay television services, while poorer rural audiences relied almost entirely on state-controlled radio for information.

For the reformers of the time, the list of priorities was long, from cementing freedom of information as a constitutional right to ensuring the SABC turned to independent public service and opening the media up to new investment. In addition, inequality of access demanded attention, and particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that previously marginalised voices in communities that were generally black and poor gained better access to the information ecosystem. The popular slogan of "democratising the media" captured the drive for new grassroots media channels, mainly in the shape of community broadcast.[5]

The impetus to give voice to disadvantaged groups was in line with a broader ambition to ensure South Africa's democracy was participative, going beyond the routines of regular voting. According to the founding provisions of the Constitution, government was to be marked by profound "accountability, responsiveness and openness."[6] South African democracy aspired to provide for maximum involvement by citizens in decision-making, and innovative mechanisms were designed to achieve this purpose.

The focus of this report is on the measures taken to level the media playing field by encouraging independent media in disadvantaged areas. It was a concerted effort to ensure more equitable access to "information as a public good", in the phrase later popularised by UNESCO.[7]

Much has been written about South Africa's media and other reforms, but the focus has largely been on the commanding heights of the media like the SABC. There has been comparatively little focused attention on the project to develop new community media. Some 30 years have passed after the first democratic elections, providing a good opportunity to assess successes and failings.

South Africa has been seen as a laboratory of democratic reform in many respects and provides a case study to examine how best to build and safeguard a pluralistic and independent media sector. The country's deep and persistent socio-economic inequality parallels the reality in many other countries, particularly in the Global South.

News deserts that match socio-economic differences are common across the world and impact significantly on information access. South Africa's experience gives insight into the impact of politics, the importance of civil society and the complex role of the state. The experience shines a light on regulatory options, issues of resourcing, commercial and state funding models as well as how the reform agenda needs to change to address new challenges.

This report considers all forms of media serving marginalised areas. We include not just community radio, but also small independent commercial publishers, community television and online initiatives. Though community broadcasters have received most policy and scholarly attention, independent publishing, mostly in print but also some online, has mushroomed and plays an important role in many poor communities.

Methodologically, we rely on secondary sources as well as some new empirical data which includes new research about basic information, on content and business models and some survey results. Several interviews with key stakeholders were also held.

02
Building a grassroots media sector

Various policy interventions were necessary to reshape and level the media landscape to promote inclusivity, equity and diversity, focusing strongly on the development of new, independent voices serving those on the information margins. The 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) underscored the significance of a diverse media landscape for national development: "New voices at national, regional and local levels, and genuine competition rather than a monopoly of ideas, must be encouraged."[8]

In examining the first 30 years of South Africa's democracy, this report categorizes interventions into two broad phases. The first, foundational phase, created the basic architecture to democratize the broadcasting sector and promote a diverse and pluralistic media environment. Crucially, it put in place the main building blocks to enable and support grassroots media. This phase was characterized by the celebratory mood and optimism of a nation redefining itself after decades of segregation and censorship.

The second phase centred on consolidating the position of local and community media and refining administrative arrangements but was also marked by considerable policy uncertainty amid a focus on the advancing digital technology landscape. In contrast to the optimism of the first phase, the second was shaped by deepening socio-economic divisions within the country and political fracturing.

Democratising the broadcasting sector

The foundational phase of South Africa media reform focused on the big-picture changes necessary to create a diversified broadcasting sector. The Jabulani! Freedom of the Airwaves Conference held in the Netherlands in 1991 brought together media activists, journalists and representatives of liberation movements, including the ANC, to discuss the future of broadcasting in South Africa.[9]

Its recommendations were important in crystallising the key elements of reform, which were then implemented over the coming years:

- Restructuring the South African Broadcasting Corporation to reduce its dominance and create space for other voices;
- Establishment of an independent regulatory regime; and
- The development of community broadcasting as a separate "tier" of broadcasting, along with a new commercial sector and a reimagined public sector.

Restructuring the South African Broadcasting Corporation

As South Africa transitioned to democracy following Nelson Mandela's release in 1990, it became evident that the media landscape required immediate attention to ensure free and fair elections.[10] Consequently, the SABC was among the first institutions to undergo restructuring, transforming into an independent public service broadcaster. The political transition process was largely shaped by the dominance of the African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP).

Influential advocacy groups, such as labour unions, NGOs, religious organizations, and community groups, aligned themselves with these two major political blocs to ensure their perspectives influenced policy. The NP bloc initiated the first step toward broadcasting reforms by establishing the Viljoen Task Group, which focused on policy adjustments, structural reforms, and restructuring the SABC. However, this initiative faced criticism for being an attempt to forestall more transformative changes.[11]

Civil society played a central role in shaping media reform. Groups like the Open Media (COM) and the Campaign for Independent Broadcasting (CIB) ensured that the process was not controlled by the outgoing government. The COM and CIB emphasized the need to democratize the state broadcaster, gaining significant support for a free and independent SABC. The COM gave inputs on media matters at the multi-party Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), the central forum of negotiations on the future of the country.

This meant that the government of the day was unable to unilaterally implement any changes to the broadcasting sector.[12] Negotiations led to the convening of a new representative SABC Board and an interim Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) established in 1993.

Independent regulation

The new IBA was created as an independent statutory regulator with a mandate to ensure fair competition, promote diversity, and uphold the public interest in broadcasting. The IBA Act contained specific anti-monopoly provisions and introduced cross-media provisions. It enabled new entrants into the media market, thus democratizing access to broadcasting resources to reflect the diverse makeup of the new democratic country.[13]

The later merger of the IBA with the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA) to form the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) in 2002 reflected a commitment to independent and equitable media governance. South Africa thus became

the first country in Africa to establish a converged media regulatory system, combining broadcasting, telecommunications and digital media.

ICASA was complemented by the Electronic Communications Act (ECA) of 2005, which sought to facilitate convergence by consolidating and streamlining the regulatory environment for all electronic communications, including broadcasting, telecommunications, and the Internet. The ECA played an important role in media transformation by providing a comprehensive legal framework that enabled greater competition, innovation, and access to communication services.

Community broadcasting

The legal framework recognised three tiers of broadcasting, as recommended by the Jabulani Conference: community, commercial, and public broadcasting.[14] In 1993, then still hopeful local broadcasters formed the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF), to advocate for the sector.[15]

The IBA prioritized the issuing of temporary licensing for community radio stations, allowing them to establish themselves on the broadcasting landscape before the entry of entities focused on business objectives. The first community radio stations were licenced in 1995, and over the following three years, over 80 community radio licenses were issued.[16]

Besides the creation of the regulatory framework, mechanisms for practical support were created. Notably, the Media Development and Diversity Agency Act (MDDA) was passed in 2002, with the purpose of supporting media diversity and pluralism through a statutorily recognized subsidy system.

The agency was established as an independently governed state entity, with the mandate to support community media through financial support, as well as training, research capacity-building. Importantly, the MDDA was designed to operate independently of government, focusing on fostering media diversity rather than exerting direct control or regulation over the media landscape.[17]

Turbulence and fine-tuning

The second broad phase of policy development focused on strengthening community media's position within the broader media ecosystem, refining some of the measures instituted in the foundational phase.

Growing turbulence impacted on local and community media policy, including tensions between the state and mainstream media, deepening economic cleavages as a result of increasing unemployment and poverty, the unexpected outbreak of a global pandemic in 2020 and a fragmenting political landscape.

Key themes include:

- Growing political tensions
- Fine-tuning the framework: compliance, local content and community participation
- Grappling with the digital revolution.

Growing tensions

This phase was marked by political tensions of various kinds that affected the media reform agenda. The ANC saw internal tensions culminate in a decision by the party's 52nd National Conference in 2007 to replace Thabo Mbeki with Jacob Zuma as party president, signalling the victory of a more populist faction. The years of the Zuma presidency (2009 – 2018) came to be known as the state capture years, with frequent clashes between government and media organisations as investigative journalists exposed examples of large-scale corruption.[18]

Relations with the mainstream media had worsened for some time, over issues such as policy towards the political and economic crisis in neighbouring Zimbabwe and the handling of the HIV crisis.[19]

The government responded by mooting several controversial policies that were seen as threats to media freedom. A Media Appeals Tribunal was proposed as a regulator for print media and the Protection of State Information Bill (which quickly came to be known as the Secrecy Bill) were introduced. However, these measures were stopped by a concerted push-back from civil society.

Several measures in broadcasting policy, too, were seen as an attempt to revert to greater state control, including a proposal to create a new public service broadcast fund that would have supported both the SABC and community broadcasters. Civil society raised concerns that some of the proposals could lead to creeping government control and that the interests of community broadcasting were not sufficiently safeguarded.[20]

Fine-tuning the regulations

Some weaknesses in the regulatory system emerged, and the period saw attempts to address these. The focus fell on compliance, content and ensuring real community involvement.

The "class licensing" regime established in the 2005 ECA had created almost automatic access to community broadcast licences, leading to rapid, somewhat uncontrolled growth in the sector. However, this resulted in operational inefficiencies, the launch of several initiatives that proved unviable and competition between some stations.

In 2014, Icasa placed a moratorium on licensing in order to assess the arrangements. After a lengthy review, Icasa issued new regulations, including a pre-registration process designed to ensure that new entrants have some experience in running an organisation.[21]

The new regulations were much tighter, placing emphasis on tax, registration and other compliance. The regulations also introduced stricter measures to combat nepotism and financial irregularities. The new regulations have placed a renewed focus on community participation and governance, and broadcasters are required to hold regular meetings with their communities and need to ensure that their governance structures are transparent and effective.

An informant from Icasa described the effect as generally positive:

> While it is still challenging to prove nepotism in some cases, especially in small communities, the regulations aim to ensure that community broadcasters operate transparently and ethically. This is a significant step towards professionalising the sector and ensuring that community broadcasters serve their intended purpose. There is also greater focus on assessing how applicants propose to meet the diverse needs of the community and how the station is distinct from other broadcasters in the same coverage area.[22]

However, in increasing the compliance burden on community broadcasters, the new regulation has also led to a decline in the number of licensed broadcasters, noted by Icasa itself.[23]

This trend has been particularly evident in the renewal process, where broadcasters are now required to address all non-compliance issues before their licenses can be renewed. As a result, many broadcasters have faced delays in renewal, and some have even been forced to shut down due to their inability to meet the new standards.[24]

Managing the digital transition

The integration of digital technologies into South Africa's broadcasting ecosystem has been a cornerstone of media policy, albeit fraught with delays, challenges and policy reversals. In many respects, the specific interests of local and community media have not been given adequate attention. Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT) was initiated in 2008 to improve broadcasting quality and repurpose analogue spectrum for data services.

However, persistent policy uncertainty and problems in distributing the set-top boxes needed for old receivers to receive DTT hindered progress, disproportionately affecting rural and low-income communities. After many delays, the deadline for turning off the analogue TV signal was set for the end of 2024. But at the time of writing, the government was signaling yet another delay. Community television has been particularly badly affected by policy confusion (See box).

The Digital Sound Broadcasting (DSB) Regulations in 2021 established a timeline to move community radio stations to digital platforms, including a period of dual illumination. However, there has been little sign of implementation.

During this period, institutional instability also affected the grassroots media sector. At government level, ministers were rarely left in place for any length of time (seven ministers held the portfolio between 2009 and 2018, changing almost annually),[25] and the functions of communication – including broadcasting – and digital technologies were variously separated and combined at ministerial level under different administrations.

The MDDA experienced significant leadership instability, with a series of acting appointments and several scandals hurting its reputation.[26] Policy development was dominated by digital questions. The most recent document, published for public comment in 2023 under the title White Paper on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services, highlights convergence, including its relevance for community broadcasting.

In summary, the South African policy landscape over the past three decades has evolved through a dynamic interplay between a commitment to inclusive media representation, state efforts to extend its control, civil society influence and technological innovation. The narrative reveals a complex, iterative process of policy development. The 2024 political transition to a Government of National Unity introduces additional uncertainty, potentially influencing future audio-visual service policies.

Local television – a casualty of policy muddle

Policy confusion has proved a significant obstacle for the development of community television. Given the relatively higher costs of the medium, policymakers struggled to work out whether regional public service television, commercial local television or non-profit local television should be prioritised. In 2004, finally, a policy paper set out parameters for local TV that would follow the radio non-profit model.[27]

Five TV stations have established themselves within the framework, with sizeable audiences, though mostly in metropolitan areas. The much-delayed shift to digital terrestrial television (DTT) has caused further difficulties, with operators in 2023 pointing out that their needs have not been taken into account. In effect, they say that the model chosen will remove large parts of their audience, increase signal distribution costs massively and force them to adopt a provincial broadcasting model – making it difficult or impossible to target a local audience.[28]

03
Where are we now?

There is no question that the South African media landscape has changed dramatically over the last 30 years. Though there are some concerns,[29] media freedom is entrenched in law and practice, and the country scores high on the global RSF Press Freedom Index, placing among the highest in Africa and ahead of major Global North democracies like the United Kingdom and USA.[30]

The broadcasting landscape is unrecognisable from where it was in 1994. There is a flourishing commercial sector, and the public broadcaster, while it has faced technical and financial challenges and controversies, remains critically important with significant audience share. As in much of the world, web-based media and platforms play an increasingly important role, hurting the business model for traditional print houses very badly. Circulation figures have plummeted as readers move online, leading to the closure of titles and widespread retrenchment in the print media.[31]

At the local level, there has been significant growth, with radio and print emerging as the most important segments. Bush Radio, described as the "mother of community radio" in South Africa, first went on air in 1993 before the legal and regulatory framework was in place. Since then, the number of stations has grown steadily, and by April 2022, there were 232 community radio licences, though not all were actively broadcasting.[32]

There has been less growth in community television due to the much larger capital costs required, regulatory confusion, and policy ineptitude. As of 2022, Icasa lists five community television licences, one of which is a Christian station whose licence long predates the post-apartheid order. Several other licences were issued at various times, but the initiatives did not succeed and the remaining four primarily serve major metropolitan areas.

Local print, on the other hand, has seen significant growth, though the drivers are different. Broadcast around the world is governed by licensing regimes, and in South Africa the legal framework for broadcast demands structures for community ownership. Print, on the other hand, is

not regulated in the same way. As a result, individual entrepreneurs could, and did, start local newspapers as private businesses. Though some of the larger media companies, chiefly Caxton, had established a significant number of local freesheets, these were primarily aimed at middle-class and white audiences. In a difficult economy that offered few opportunities, local entrepreneurs in many communities launched news sheets of varying type and quality.

By 2024, the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) had 191 member publishers (AIP 2024), who overwhelmingly started in the democratic era: only two of 45 respondents surveyed had existed before 1994, six were founded in the first decade and fully 37 were established since 2004.[33]

Most local broadcast and print media have ventured into the online space, primarily on websites and Facebook. However, only a handful have moved entirely online, while in most cases the online offshoots tend to remain secondary to the project's traditional platform. There have been several important media projects to embrace online publishing as digital natives, but they tend to be metropolitan, national or sometimes international in focus (examples include the Daily Maverick, GroundUp and The Continent).

Legal requirements ensure that all official South African languages are present in community broadcast, while non-African languages of immigrant and other communities (including Arabic, Urdu, German, Portuguese, Chinese and many others) are also well represented. Significantly, station managers listed several local languages that are officially treated as dialects of larger languages, tapping into a rich vein of local pride.[34]

Independent local publications, too, are strongly multilingual. However, a study of news bulletins across a selection of community radio stations found a relatively low 14% of material was in fact local and originally sourced.[35]

In terms of business models, both print and radio broadcast media rely primarily on commercial and state income, with little revenue derived from donor funding or direct community support.

It is noteworthy that much of the state support comes through the purchase of space, in other words it takes commercial form. State entities from national government departments to the provincial and local state, as well as some parastatal entities, use communication budgets to run public interest campaigns, to buy airtime for the live broadcast of important speeches, and for broadcasts in support of government initiatives and similar purposes.

Though the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) has injected significant sums into the media landscape by way of grants, particularly into radio, the sums are much smaller than those spent through official communication budgets. In the financial year 2020/21, the agency disbursed just under R58m (around USD3.4m), which included a special emergency allocation for operators to deal with the Covid crisis.[36]

For comparison, the central Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) spent almost R140m (USD7.4m) on "content processing and dissemination" in that financial year, which represented only a small part of overall state communication spending.[37]

Accessing advertising from private business is fraught with challenges for local publishers and broadcasters. Local economies are weak, though local retail outlets, professionals like lawyers and, perhaps surprisingly, revivalist churches spend money to attract attention. Larger advertisers are based in the bigger centres and metropolitan areas. The further away from the wealthy areas an outlet is, the more difficult it is to access significant commercial income. Not only is geographic distance an obstacle, but advertisers and agencies prefer to deal with a small number of larger media than a multiplicity of small operators. Also, administrative systems, including the capacity to provide evidence of publication or broadcast, are often weak.

As a result, a significant number of intermediaries has arisen, who take a cut for lining up relevant community media outlets for a larger communication project. Even state entities often make use of intermediaries to place material with local media.

Economic challenges mean that most local media are small, survivalist operations, though there are significant exceptions. Of six publishers who provided in-depth interviews for this project, four operated from the publisher's home (one from a converted garage, the others from dining room tables), one had two small rented offices and just one had significant office accommodation in the shape of a converted house. Radio stations have often been able to secure government funding for studios and tend to be better off with regard to an operating base. In a 2023 survey, half of all publishers who responded indicated an annual turnover of under R250 000 (around USD 13 155). Figures for broadcast were a little higher, with just over half being over R500 000 (around USD26 310).[38] These are tiny budgets.

Nevertheless, significant numbers of people work in local media. The average staff of community radio is 34 people, divided roughly equally between fully employed, partly employed and voluntary. For local print, the average staffing level is 12 people with proportionately fewer volunteers.[39] Salaries are extremely low and uncertain, and operations can only be sustained because employment opportunities in poor communities are so few that potential staff have no real alternatives. At the same time, young people gain skills that have opened doors into the mainstream media.

Significantly, the factors outlined above also mean that as marginal as they are, the distribution of local media is skewed towards areas that are relatively wealthier. Most are based in metropolitan areas, though often in the poor townships. The poorer the audience, and the further from the cities, the less likely they have access to local media. In other words, despite improvements over the past three decades, access to information and news remains highly unequal.

Audience Sizes

According to the regular audience survey carried out by the industry's authoritative Broadcast Research Council, just over 8 million adult South Africans were listening to a community radio station weekly in 2023, out of a total radio audience of around 56 million. Some of the larger community radio stations are comfortably larger than some commercial or public radio stations, with Soweto's Jozi FM boasting 399 000 listeners.[40] For community print, the AIP claims a monthly readership of 7.864m across its membership, with a total print run of 2.621m, though it should be noted these figures are not independently audited.[41]

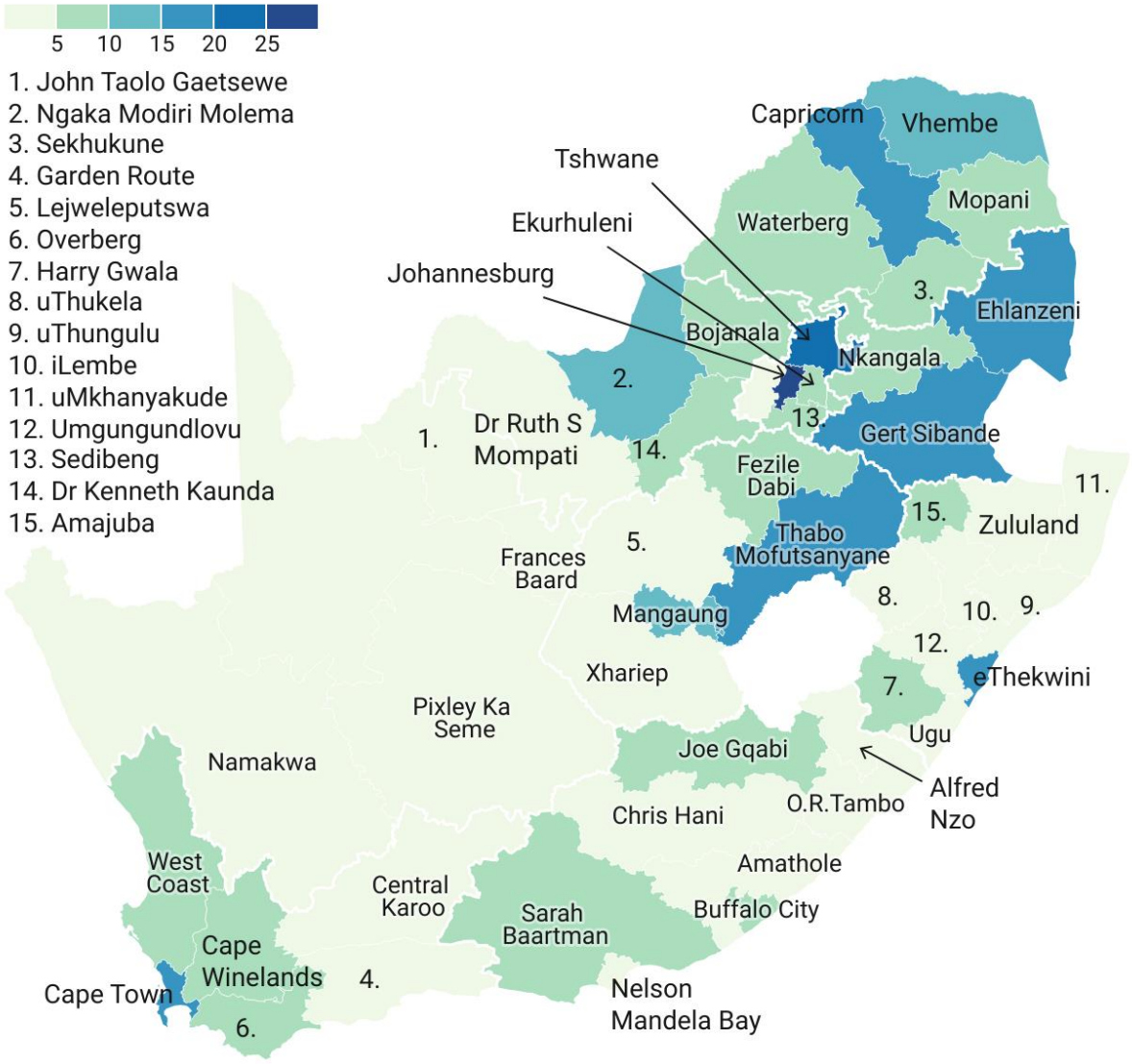
As a result of the precarious financial situation for most local media in South Africa, they are particularly vulnerable to media capture and instability. Of the six local radio stations who agreed to in-depth interviews for the project, four described significant internal conflicts in the recent past. These have taken the form of takeover bids by particular factions in a community, the forcible occupation of studios, arson and even murder.

In one case, a radio station south of Johannesburg, Karabo FM, was burnt to the ground in 2013. It turned out some time later (when one of the arsonists complained to a Johannesburg newspaper that he had not been fully paid for the attack) that the attack had been organised by the mayor as he was unhappy with the station's coverage of a local dispute.[42]

Local publishers are less subject to such internal disputes, probably because they own their businesses outright without mechanisms for community accountability. However, they feel external pressures very keenly. One publisher described an attempt by the mayor to buy out the title. When he would not accept the offer, the mayor tried unsuccessfully to start his own newspaper in opposition, and then stopped the local municipality from advertising. The title had to close for some years, until shifts in local politics reopened access to municipal advertising.[43] Another publisher was upfront about the implications of dependence on municipal communications spending: "I want them on board, I will try to make sure I always report positively on them."[44] Another, fiercely protective of his reputation as an investigative journalist, said he did not even try to attract advertising from the local authorities as his critical reporting made that impossible.[45] Unfolding in remote areas, such conflicts and tensions rarely attract the attention of national media or civil society groups. The regulator, too, lacks the capacity to attend to local issues when they erupt.

Local media distribution

Number of local media (radio and print) available per district municipality.



Radio stations and publishers with a local focus, according to their primary geographic base. Included are campus radio, but not community of interest media.

Map: Franz Krüger • Source: Compiled from Broadcast Research Council report on 2023 radio listenership and 2024 membership list of Association of Independent Publishers • Created with Datawrapper

04
What worked

The local media landscape in South Africa is undoubtedly much richer than it was before 1994. As described in the previous section, hundreds of new independent media outlets have emerged, particularly in print and radio. However, though many operate in poor urban townships and rural areas, the lack of resources means that distribution skews towards wealthier communities and areas. Most remain small, survivalist enterprises that are vulnerable to instability and capture. Overall, inequalities in access to information in South Africa remain stark, mirroring wider socio-economic inequality.

The growth in local media can be chalked up as a success for post-apartheid policy measures to democratise the news media. But South Africa's ability to make good policies is not always matched by the country's capacity to implement them, which explains some of the challenges in today's media landscape. Could more have been done? Are there lessons to be learned for other societies contemplating interventions in their media landscapes?

The politics of policymaking

The push and momentum for media reform was central to the transition from apartheid, fuelled by a strong and optimistic democratic impetus. Strong involvement by civil society groups proved crucial, echoing experiences elsewhere,[46] and ensuring broad participation was critical to both process and outcome:

The kind of participatory, civil society–based deliberative democracy that has become the reverie of so many Western social and political theorists in recent years has been occurring on the ground in complex and grubby fashion in the new South Africa.[47]

However, there was a shift in attitude in the ruling ANC after the final constitution was passed in 1996, followed by the departure of the National Party from the ruling coalition. The ANC moved to take firmer control of the levers of state power, while also embracing more market-friendly policies. The party lost the will to intervene more directly in the media market. The initial vision for the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) would have given it powers to tackle media monopolies, but these proposals were dropped and it was ultimately established primarily as a funding agency.[48]

Writers like Duncan have been sharply critical of the ANC's failure to tackle the fundamentally commercial nature of the South African media, arguing it is at the heart of a failure to achieve fundamental transformation.[49] And Sparks argues that the South African transition is best understood as a process of elite renewal and continuity.[50]

Though the rhetoric of participation and of the importance of popular voices has remained strong, the reality has not always followed suit. Actual popular participation in policymaking has weakened over the years, though a handful of civil society organisations have continued to provide important input.

At the same time, the new government's increasingly strained relations with the mainstream media left the ruling ANC feeling under siege. The party cast critical journalists as part of a hostile, reactionary media dedicated to reversing its achievements. A 2012 party conference resolution noted the party was facing an "ideological battle … mainly through the market forces which seek to dislodge the democratic forces as the drivers of change."[51] Several attempts were made to assert greater state control over the media, but without success.

Against this background, community media and the SABC gained significance as alternative channels to provide news to citizens. As the 2012 conference resolution noted, "The advent of community and public media offers an additional potentially progressive opportunity for the ANC, depending on the ability to influence this media and provide it with adequate support."[52]

Media and communications policymaking was often disjointed. A steady stream of inquiries, green and white paper processes, laws and regulation have grappled with the complex interplay of issues of access, local content, digitalisation, media ownership, telecommunications, spectrum and others. Further complications have arisen from frequent changes in the position of minister, as well as a lack of clarity in the division of responsibility between the multitude of institutions and laws dealing with aspects of communications.

Some gaps and weaknesses

The shifting politics informing policy, instability in some key institutions and an often superficial enthusiasm for everything digital have created gaps and weaknesses in the framework for local and community media in South Africa. This report has shown that conflict can and does erupt around local media, extending to administrative acts like the suspension of station managers, occupations of studios, even arson and murder. The South African experience is that local media are sites of significant local power, perhaps particularly in disadvantaged areas with few other resources, and can therefore become the objects of contestation and capture.

An effective regulatory framework needs measures to manage potential conflict, and these are largely absent from the South African system. Relevant bodies like Icasa and the MDDA have on occasion played a role in resolving specific conflicts, and in one respect, regulations were amended to minimise improper influence. The rules now forbid the involvement of political officials and family members in the boards of community broadcasters.[53] Though positive, these measures do not go far enough in tackling local conflict and capture.

Closely related is the critical question of resourcing. As a practical expression of community support, voluntary work and direct contribution are central features of community radio in the Global North. Though it was always clear that poor communities have less to give, an expectation of some community contribution was written into the South African model. The legal definition of community radio lists donations and membership fees among the possible sources of income.[54] In an early policy document, Icasa wrote: "It is believed that communities would not mind making pledges if they felt that the radio station was there for the advancement and development of the community and that they owned the radio station."[55]

The reality has turned out rather differently. Volunteers are an important part of the makeup of most community radio stations, though involvement in disadvantaged communities is strongly driven by the lack of alternative opportunities. Aside from a few exceptions that are mostly found among stations serving faith and cultural communities, financial and practical contributions from community members are rare. In the 2023 survey, only three of 19 radio respondents indicated audience contributions of above 10%, while in print the figure was five out of 29 responses.

Instead, advertising – outlawed for community media in jurisdictions like Australia – has emerged as by far the most important source of income. A 2023 study commissioned by the MDDA cast the ongoing challenge of viability in purely commercial terms:

Community and Small Commercial Media ("CSCM") organisations have struggled to position the CSCM sector as authorities on local content or as the platform to reach often-inaccessible audiences. … This means that community media platforms have not yet been able to convince advertisers of their value for advertising – which is the lifeline for the community media's sustainability in the long term.[56]

However, community media in socio-economically distressed areas face considerable problems in accessing commercial advertising.

The most important policy intervention set up to assist small and community media was the creation of the MDDA in 2002. While the initial concept would have included a more interventionist role to dismantle media monopolies, this was watered down in negotiations with industry and the agency is now almost purely a funding mechanism. But critics have argued its funding is insufficient for real impact.

The MDDA's funding comes primarily from a levy of 0.2% of turnover that is imposed on broadcasters, though they may elect to contribute to the Universal Service Access Fund instead of the MDDA. Recent (2020/21) figures are that the broadcasters' levy contributes about two thirds of the agency's annual budget of R104m (around USD 5.8m), with government contributing the rest.[57] Actual grant payments in that year amounted to just under R58m (around USD3.26m). Initial

proposals were for all sectors of the established media to fund the MDDA, but contributions from the large print companies were made voluntary and have stopped in the face of the business crisis facing print. As a result, local publishers receive very little funding, with the bulk of funding going to broadcast.[58]

Despite the difficulties, the model of drawing funds from profitable sectors of the media economy by way of a levy is a good one. Consideration should be given to extending the redistributive principle in order to increase support for disadvantaged media.

The MDDA funds projects on the basis of proposals submitted by individual media, rather than ongoing running costs, and has assisted in reducing broadcasters' debts with the signal distributor Sentech. There have been complaints of overly onerous administrative requirements, and the agency has suffered years of instability at management and board level that have further hampered its effectiveness.[59]

More fundamentally, the agency's approach is premised on the view that local and community media can and should achieve self-sufficiency. The evaluation of specific proposals includes consideration of their longer-term sustainability and the MDDA recently published an extensive study to identify a "model of sustainability."[60]

The study briefly mentions socio-economic inequality, but does not address the issue in any depth though it is arguably the most important issue of all. Nor are any significant suggestions made for relevant policy options, such as recognition that differential support should be made available to media depending on their context, and that support in the poorest areas will have to be long term.

Government advertising has come to assume a crucial role in the business models of local, independent media. With constrained MDDA budgets for direct funding, the use of communication budgets by government entities - national, provincial and local, as well as parastatal organisations - has proved an attractive tool, not least because of perceptions that mainstream media are hostile.

The government has set the target of 30% of communication spending to be directed at local and community media but has not enforced it.[61] Figures for the actual levels of spending are not available, though the MDDA in a presentation to parliament said 2% of total government ads spent is directed to community media.[62]

Whatever the total spending, it is clear that government communication spending can make a significant difference to an individual media operator, given their typically small budgets. Money is spent not only on traditional advertising, but also on sponsored talkshows, live broadcast of important speeches, community activations and much else. Some media benefit from free accommodation from a local municipality.[63]

At the same time, local officials and politicians may easily be tempted to misuse communication budgets for leverage over the media. A few specific cases have come to light, such as the decision by Makhanda municipality in 2007 to institute an advertising boycott against the local newspaper over their coverage. The paper Grocott's Mail is run by the local university's journalism department, which decided to go to court and finally forced the municipality to backtrack.[64]

In interviews for this project, publishers in two towns no more than 100km apart showed acute awareness of local political sensitivities: one said he would not even try to seek advertising from his local municipality because of the critical nature of his coverage; the other said quite clearly he would stay away from controversy because of his dependence on the district municipality. Other examples have likely escaped notice simply because they play out far from outside attention.

In other countries, attempts have been made to create a framework to govern the use of official advertising. In Argentina, guidelines set out that official advertising should be allocated only on the basis of four considerations: size of audience; relevance to the particular message; geographic area; and promotion of federalism and plurality.[65]

The guidelines are poorly enforced, but an alliance of community media has launched a campaign to tighten the rules and increase transparency.[66] It is striking that there is no discussion in South Africa of the dangers of capture arising from official advertising. In countries of the Global South, official communication spending cannot be excluded as an important mechanism of support for local and community media. But it is of critical importance to ensure the money is used fairly and transparently.

In these different ways, weaknesses in the South African framework can be seen to derive from an overly idealised view of local media which insufficiently recognised the impact of contexts of poverty on local media. The South African lesson is that conditions of deep inequality have extensive impacts on governance, politics and resourcing which need careful consideration.

05
Recommendations for a policy on information rights

Significant advances have been noted in the 30 years since the founding election and associated media reforms. But several policy weaknesses and failures have hampered the independent media sector's ability to live up to the initial transformative vision. Access remains profoundly unequal. Several recommendations emerge which are worth considering in other countries.

Directed at policymakers and the media development community, the recommendations are built around the call for a comprehensive policy on rights to information, recognised as a public good.[67] Such a policy should take seriously the impact of socio-economic inequalities on information access and aim to level the media playing field. A central focus should be on pushing back news deserts by creating an enabling environment for independent, grassroots media outlets that can deliver a local public service.

Information rights must be recognised as linked to but distinct from other questions, including wider socio-economic development and the dynamics of the admittedly complex, fast moving and important range of digital issues. In South Africa, a lack of focus on information rights as a primary question has allowed it to be overshadowed by, for instance, issues of digital transformation.

Policy needs to address both market and state mechanisms. The South African experience shows that commercial models are insufficient to ensure quality media in severely disadvantaged areas, at least not in the medium term. Measures to strengthen local media markets should be explored, while the effectiveness of existing state support mechanisms need to be strengthened.

An information rights policy in countries of the Global South needs to take into account that though the need for additional resources is great, opportunities are few and often linked to dangers of political influence. The following suggestions seek to prioritise ways of making existing opportunities as effective as possible.

Review and strengthen arrangements and institutions

Relevant policies and arrangements need to be interrogated for their impact on information inequality. Arrangements should be platform-agnostic, while protecting operators against capture and creating systems to manage conflict. The South African experience has been that simplistic definitions of community in regulation serve to gloss over the reality of power-play and contestation.

Relevant entities should be reviewed to make sure they have sufficient capacity and are fit for purpose. Jusic and Gilberds identified "the perils of a weak state" as a key risk in media reform, and the South African experience illustrates the point well. It is unclear, for example, why the state's signal distributor Sentech should operate on a 'for profit' basis.[68]

Consideration should be given to the creation of an office or agency that is responsible for continually scanning the environment for trends, threats and opportunities to improve information access on the margins. A focus on low-hanging fruit holds much promise. Funds available for training, grants for cultural activity, tax relief for donations, support for small business: these are just a few examples of existing mechanisms that may be better used to strengthen small media.

In the South African case, the initial concept for the MDDA pointed in this direction, but it has ended up as an inadequately funded dispenser of short-term funding. A "root and branch" overhaul is needed.[69] The organisation's independence from government should be strengthened, new funding sources secured. Importantly, focus should move away from short term projects to initiatives that improve matters for the sector as a whole. In order to play an effective role, the agency has to do a great deal of work to repair a badly damaged reputation.

More consistent and transparent use of state communication spending

In countries of the Global South, state communication spending plays an important role in media economies and can be used to support small media. In South Africa, the government has promised to dedicate 30% of communication budgets to small media, though it has been unable to create mechanisms to ensure the promise is met. But frameworks are needed to prevent abuse and ensure spending is fair and transparent. A good starting point would be the creation of a system to track spending and make it transparent.

A Basic Income Grant for media on the margins

A Basic Income Grant – an ongoing, guaranteed minimum grant for media on any platform that satisfies a set of conditions – is necessary to preserve local news in areas that are simply too poor to sustain independent media. To be entitled to a grant, media would need to serve an area or community on the socio-economic margins, to be independent and to meet minimum requirements for local and independent journalism. The amounts need not be large, and eligibility would be subject to regular review.

Looking to the future

The three decades since the end of apartheid in South Africa provide valuable lessons from its media reforms, which hold significance for countries grappling with information poverty and inequalities rooted in socio-economic disparities. These challenges in the face of the rapidly changing digital environment call for innovative and nuanced policy responses.

As advanced AI technologies evolve, their impact on the global media landscape becomes increasingly significant, bringing forth both challenges and opportunities for local and community media. There is a need for governments and media reform organisations to develop policies that regulate AI, emphasizing inclusivity, diversity and accessibility in the media ecosystem. Looking ahead, robust and inclusive media policies that not only amplify diverse voices but also withstand socio-economic challenges and technological transformation will be crucial for Global South nations.

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- Kate Skinner of the Association of Independent Publishers (AIP): 21 March 2024, online
- Mamedupe Kgatshe, Khanyile Ndawo, Gladys Malefo, Busisiwe Mashigo, Lufuluvhi Netshifhefhe, Silas Phoshoko of the Independent Communications Authority of SA (Icasa): 20 June 2024, online
- Michael Markovitz of the GIBS Media Leadership Think Tank: 3 April 2024, online
- Nadia Bulbulia of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB): 18 March 2024, online
- Sisanda Nkoala, Media academic at the University of the Western Cape: 26 March 2024, online
- Shoeshoe Qhu of the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA): 23 May 2024, online
- Thabang Pusoyabone of the National Community Radio Forum (NCRF).

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