



[Media and Freedom of Expression](#)

Everything Has Changed

Two African Media Houses Creatively Master the Pandemic

[Christoph Plate / David Mbae](#)

While willingness to pay for good journalism has long been considered low among African media consumers, appreciation for reliable information has recently increased noticeably in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Anyone prepared to be innovative and to focus on quality can succeed even in these difficult times, as 263Chat from Zimbabwe and the pan-African project The Continent impressively demonstrate.

The pandemic has changed perceptions, including among publishers and media consumers on the African continent. When the Sub-Saharan Africa Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung organised a conference in Ghana's capital Accra at the end of 2018, the publishers and editors-in-chief from over a dozen African states who gathered there all agreed that a paywall for serious journalism, for verified news, could never, ever work. In Africa, people prefer to get news for free and use the various platforms to be reasonably well informed, but wherever possible avoid paying for it. Spending money on good journalism – until the pandemic, that was the preserve of just a few bank directors or ministers who could afford a digital subscription to The Economist or the Financial Times. But, for a media house to survive, it takes a critical number of readers, listeners, or viewers who are willing to pay.

Quality Has its Price

Three years and a devastating pandemic later, the media situation has changed dramatically: tens of thousands of journalists on the continent have lost their jobs. Advertising revenues have plummeted disastrously. And a growing number of publishers are asking themselves how and why they should actually keep going.

But just as every crisis presents an opportunity, there are now paywalls in newspapers and websites in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya. Anyone who wants to access specific or special media content will have to get out their credit card or be forcefully reminded that journalists need to survive, too.¹ During the pandemic,

the ever-growing middle classes in countries like Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa seem to have realised that you have to pay for good and verified journalism. When it comes to dealing with a threat like the pandemic, it is not enough to simply look at random websites. If you want reliable information, you ideally should pay something to show your appreciation for this kind of journalism. Good journalism will continue to exist, but it will have to look for new distribution channels and financing models.

In Zimbabwe and South Africa, two very innovative media start-ups have shown, during the pandemic, that it takes creativity and the highest degree of entrepreneurial flexibility to steer a media outlet through difficult times, continue paying wages, and, above all, reliably supply the public in the usual manner. 263Chat in Zimbabwe's capital Harare and The Continent, the first WhatsApp newspaper to be distributed and read throughout Africa, are evidence of the importance of serious journalism in Africa.

In Zimbabwe in particular, the absence of free debate about the right path for society is clearly felt. Some churches and foundations are trying to initiate such a debate. But the ruling party, Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), has always used the media to consolidate its own power. It deliberately uses them as a tool to shape public opinion in its own favour, rendering informed debate about the country's problems and challenges difficult.

Like every sector in Zimbabwe, the media are a product of the political and socio-economic

environment. Since the turn of the millennium, the country has been in a continuous crisis, which some attribute to the crisis typical of developing countries when transitioning to a middle-income economy.² However, the thesis that complex political and economic factors, intertwined with national, regional, and international factors, are at work in Zimbabwe's case seems more plausible.³

The multitude of publications gives the impression of a diverse media landscape – but this is an illusion.

Whatever the verdict, the impact of the crisis is clear for all to see. Internal political power struggles within the ruling party and the suppression and weakening of a legitimate opposition are clearly evident. This is leading to an ongoing erosion of civil, socio-economic, and cultural freedoms, thus fulfilling all the characteristics of an increasingly dysfunctional state.⁴

Visitors to Zimbabwe may get the impression that the media landscape is diverse and that a democratic process is being promoted, in view of the multitude of publications. But this is an illusion. The main media (television, radio, and print) are directly controlled by the Ministry of Information and the president's office. They belong to the state, to private individuals with close ties to ZANU-PF, or to high-ranking military officers.

Media legislation does not adequately protect free access to information and thus enable and promote the democratic process. Rather, the regulations are intended to help maintain the political status quo, the goal being to ensure that critical voices remain muted, if not silenced.

263Chat: Independent Information for Zimbabwe

In September 2012, under these far from favourable auspices, the story of 263Chat began. Publisher

Nigel Mugamu started with a Twitter account in his own name and a hashtag. +263 is the international telephone code for Zimbabwe. Founder and CEO Mugamu, a trained accountant, has since taken on the poetic title of "Chief Storyteller". His parents went to Fiji on a scholarship in the late 1970s. They returned as accountants to an independent Zimbabwe, where Nigel Mugamu grew up. His parents, traditional on the one hand, cosmopolitan on the other, taught him early on to think outside the box and prepared him and his younger sister for life in two worlds. Here the traditional family life of the Zimbabwean middle class, there the fast pace of Europe and the West, including their customs. Nigel Mugamu completed his bachelor's degree in Australia, where he then worked as an accountant for another five years. After a year back home, he applied for a master's degree at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He financed his studies by working for an American company that specialised in data storage. In 2012, he was already discussing political, economic, and social issues, such as the country's political polarisation and economic path on Twitter using the hashtag #263. At that time, Nigel Mugamu did not have his own website.

Awareness began to grow in 2013, an election year. More and more Zimbabweans had access to social media. The election campaign was at the forefront of the news, and a growing number of citizens were looking for reliable information beyond the traditional media. This led to international media such as the BBC and Al Jazeera citing 263Chat as a source when reporting from Zimbabwe. Regional visibility was the result. In 2013, 263Chat received an award from Highway Africa, a conference at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa. Highway Africa was sponsored by businesses, the South African government, and development cooperation organisations; it honoured innovations in digital

Digitisation as an opportunity: 263Chat → produces a daily newspaper for Zimbabwe that is sent to subscribers as an e-paper via WhatsApp.

Source: © Philimon Bulawayo, Reuters.



technologies, journalism, and media. As a result, 263Chat started cooperating with embassies and development agencies in Zimbabwe.

In the subsequent years, 263Chat's offer was expanded to include multimedia channels such as YouTube and SoundCloud. The #263Chat hashtag had become established, so international media houses such as CNN and the BBC used the #263Chat hashtag and the Twitter account @263Chat in their reports to capture the mood of the country.

The real story of the 263Chat company began in 2015, when it succeeded for the first time in making journalistic work commercially viable. It gathered, edited, and shared information through its team of four journalists spread across the four largest cities (Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, and Mutare). From then on, this news was not only disseminated on social media but also collated on its website 263chat.com.

Since many of the devices are not internet-enabled, text messaging is the main means of communication for many citizens.

In June 2016, more than 63,000 people followed the account on Twitter. There were also 8,300 followers on Facebook and 1,300 on Instagram. As a result, 263Chat established itself as one of the leading providers in the production and live-streaming of events held by civil society organisations and private companies. The year 2017, which marked a turning point in Zimbabwe with the ousting of long-term president Robert Mugabe, was also a crucial one for 263Chat. At the time when the military leadership deposed the long-serving ruler and placed him under house arrest, 263Chat first published its e-paper, which remains an important reporting tool to this day. The e-paper is a daily newspaper published from Monday to Friday and sent to subscribers as a

PDF file via WhatsApp. Financed by advertising, the publication is free of charge for readers. The number of subscribers has been growing steadily ever since.

Successful Innovators, despite the Pandemic

263Chat has also been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Reporting was made much more difficult by restricted freedom of movement. In addition, the Media Commission, which is responsible for accrediting journalists, did not issue press credentials until mid-2020, so journalists could not prove that they were providing an essential service. The Media Commission's policy has been criticised by independent journalists for years for making free reporting difficult and criminalising journalistic work. Numerous journalists have been arrested or intimidated by the security forces.⁵ An employee of 263Chat was also temporarily detained. Despite the increasingly deteriorating economic situation of a large part of the population, e-paper subscriber numbers have increased, as has website traffic. More and more companies wanted to advertise digitally, which gave 263Chat an advantage over traditional media.

Technical innovation is important, especially in times of a pandemic. And so, since June 2021, the company has been able to distribute news via text messages. This may seem old-fashioned to outsiders, but it is immensely significant: Zimbabwe had 14.7 million registered mobile connections as of January 2021.⁶ Many devices are not internet-enabled. Text messages are, thus, the most important means of communication for many citizens. The number of potential recipients has increased enormously, and access to daily news has been made available to people whose previous contact with independent media was non-existent or only sporadic. Looking ahead to future elections, this represents a transformation of the media landscape in Zimbabwe that should not be underestimated.

263Chat is commercially successful today because it has used digital media from the beginning and in so doing has attracted advertisers. In

addition, the company has entered into agreements with four universities in Zimbabwe to help train young journalists and raise their standards. With a team now consisting of ten journalists, 263Chat today publishes content on 263chat.com, in the e-paper, on Twitter, on Facebook, and on Instagram, and now also by text message. Meanwhile, 263Chat has 488,000 followers on Twitter, 198,000 on Facebook, 54,000 on YouTube, and 46,500 people receive the e-paper via WhatsApp. This rapid growth can be explained by increasing digitisation and the public's shift to media that offer a low-access threshold by providing independent news free of charge to the general public. This is significant because almost three-quarters of all Zimbabweans live in rural areas. Their votes decide elections, but, in the past, they have often been misled by the ruling elites.

In Zimbabwe's polarised political landscape, 263Chat always reports the news without political bias. Credibility and the resulting trust of a growing readership also determine the attractiveness of the media for advertisers in Zimbabwe in the long term.

The Continent: A Pan-African Project

The creativity and innovative spirit of Nigel Mugamu inspired Simon Allison in South Africa to launch his start-up The Continent despite, or perhaps because of, the pandemic. A little over a year after the WhatsApp newspaper first appeared in April 2020 – the first pan-African publication that is not controlled by any censorship authority, that cannot be prevented from printing, and that cannot be held up at a mail distribution centre – it has grown to 11,000 subscribers. It is estimated that, on average, each weekly issue sent via WhatsApp is redistributed to at least six different recipients, which means that there might be almost 100,000 readers per week. “We are probably the most widely read continental publication in Africa,” Allison says with pride. And donors are clamouring to be part of such a project: George Soros' Open Society Foundation has just approached the small editorial team at The Continent with a request to be allowed to fund an elaborate research project in

terror-stricken northern Mozambique. Simon Allison will go to Maputo and tell the Mozambican journalists set to carry out research in the north about the issues that interest a continental audience. From experience, he knows that: “These journalists have the contacts and insights that a foreigner would never have.” The US National Endowment for Democracy in Washington, D.C. funds some editorial positions. At present, eleven people are employed, including four full-time editors, with part-time staff including a designer, a distribution expert, and a final editor.

The Continent must be careful not to become a victim of its own success.

The Continent was created with the help of the long-established Mail & Guardian newspaper in Johannesburg. The publication and its predecessors, such as the Rand Daily Mail, where Allison's father worked during apartheid times and which was banned, or the Weekly Mail & Guardian under then editor-in-chief Anton Harber, have done great service in exposing the human rights violations of the apartheid regime. Today, however, many of the almost 30,000 subscribers only buy the newspaper out of habit. The attempt under former owner Trevor Ncube to become a pan-African publication ended in financial disaster. Even though the newspaper's header still bears the words “Africa's best read”, it was traumatic for the majority white editorial staff to witness the failure of the attempt to achieve a pan-African readership. The Mail & Guardian's willingness to get involved in the new project, The Continent, was therefore limited to providing occasional texts for republication and allowing the paper's Africa editor, Simon Allison, to work on this pan-African project.

New technologies such as WhatsApp, alongside increasing digitisation, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, gave him the opportunity. At a conference of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Media Programme in Gaborone in 2019 on the



media credibility crisis, Allison presented his idea of a truly African publication. He would never have guessed at the time how quickly The Continent would become a reality. He was

helped in this by meeting the innovative Zimbabwean newsman Nigel Mugamu at that very same conference in Gaborone. Mugamu shared the idea of distributing his 263Chat publication



Diverse reporting: The pan-African publication The Continent covers a wide range of topics – from the political situation in Mali to arms trafficking in the Republic of Congo and fishing in Sierra Leone. Source: © Cooper Inveen, Reuters.

compared to the circulation numbers of other publications on the continent. Besides surprising countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, most subscribers live in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, or the US.

The diaspora craves information and reading The Continent on a smartphone or tablet meets this need. Readers in the diaspora are usually also willing to pay some money to keep their publication of choice going. Premium Times in Nigeria is a successful example of this. And since their founder Dapo Olorunyomi and Simon Allison have also met at conferences of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Media Programme, the Nigerian experience of tapping into the diaspora will also benefit the creators of The Continent in South Africa.

The newspaper publishes weekly city portraits, from Mogadishu to Khartoum to Lagos. It reports on money laundering in Kinshasa, arms trafficking in Brazzaville, the situation of homosexuals in Uganda, and fishermen in Sierra Leone, whose lives are made difficult by Chinese fishing associations. Short analyses question why there has now been another military coup in Mali, or whether the leader of Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram is really dead or not.

Small Team, Big Dreams

In the meantime, the advertising industry has shown an interest in The Continent – for instance, a large South African bank that wants to enter the continental banking business. However, their attempts to put sponsored content into the newspaper were rejected by the editors. Zitto Kabwe, a key Tanzanian opposition politician, has described The Continent's work as one of the most important contributions to

to Zimbabwean readers via WhatsApp. Allison was inspired. Today, there are 11,000 subscribers and an estimated 100,000 readers in 105 different countries, which is very respectable

democracy and freedom of expression during the rule of dictator John Magufuli.

Because the team at The Continent is very small, everyone has to do a bit of everything; the editor is currently also doing some of the bookkeeping; the staff are creative and have lots of ideas. Yet, The Continent has to be careful not to become a victim of its own success. It has to avoid growing too fast and, above all, not make the mistake that plagues its parent paper – reprinting feature reports and essays that politically interested readers have often already seen days before on other websites and opinion forums on Africa. Long and well-told stories are also possible in the WhatsApp newspaper, which is limited to 30 pages per issue. 150 journalists from Africa wrote for The Continent in its first year and, according to Simon Allison, they were all paid.

A French edition is planned for the future, which could be a no-brainer given the rather uninspiring media landscape in West Africa. Simon Allison also dreams of voice notes that could turn the newspaper into an audio experience. The greatest merit, however, is not only having launched a courageous and visionary project during a pandemic but, for the first time, to have given readers in Sierra Leone an opportunity to experience good journalism from Zimbabwe, and vice versa.

The main task now is to maintain quality, avoid journalistic mistakes, and further consolidate the trust in serious journalism that has grown significantly during the pandemic with weekly editions of The Continent. The Continent and 263Chat are still free to consumers. This is also thanks to certain philanthropists, in particular from the US. But ideally, these two creative ventures will also be able to stand on their own two feet at some point.

Just as 263Chat was very popular in Zimbabwe, especially during the crisis, and promoted the democratic process, The Continent succeeds in something else: it provides information about the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa across colonial and linguistic boundaries. African journalism is

also not about reinventing the wheel. But now, particularly after the pandemic, media makers have to question themselves more often than before: is this the right way to go? How can I use new technologies? Am I reaching the people I want to reach?⁷

Creative ideas have emerged from the crisis. However, many of these projects or start-ups need to free themselves from their dependence on powerful sponsors in the medium term. That is why it is promising that publishers like Nigel Mugamu and editors like Simon Allison never tire of emphasising that, particularly in these difficult times, senior journalists also have to think like managers. Only in this way will this kind of important journalism be successful in the medium term.

- translated from German -

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