

COMMUNITY NEWS PUBLICATIONS ARE THE LIFEBLOOD OF LOCAL JOURNALISM, PROVIDING A PLATFORM FOR VOICES THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE GO UNHEARD

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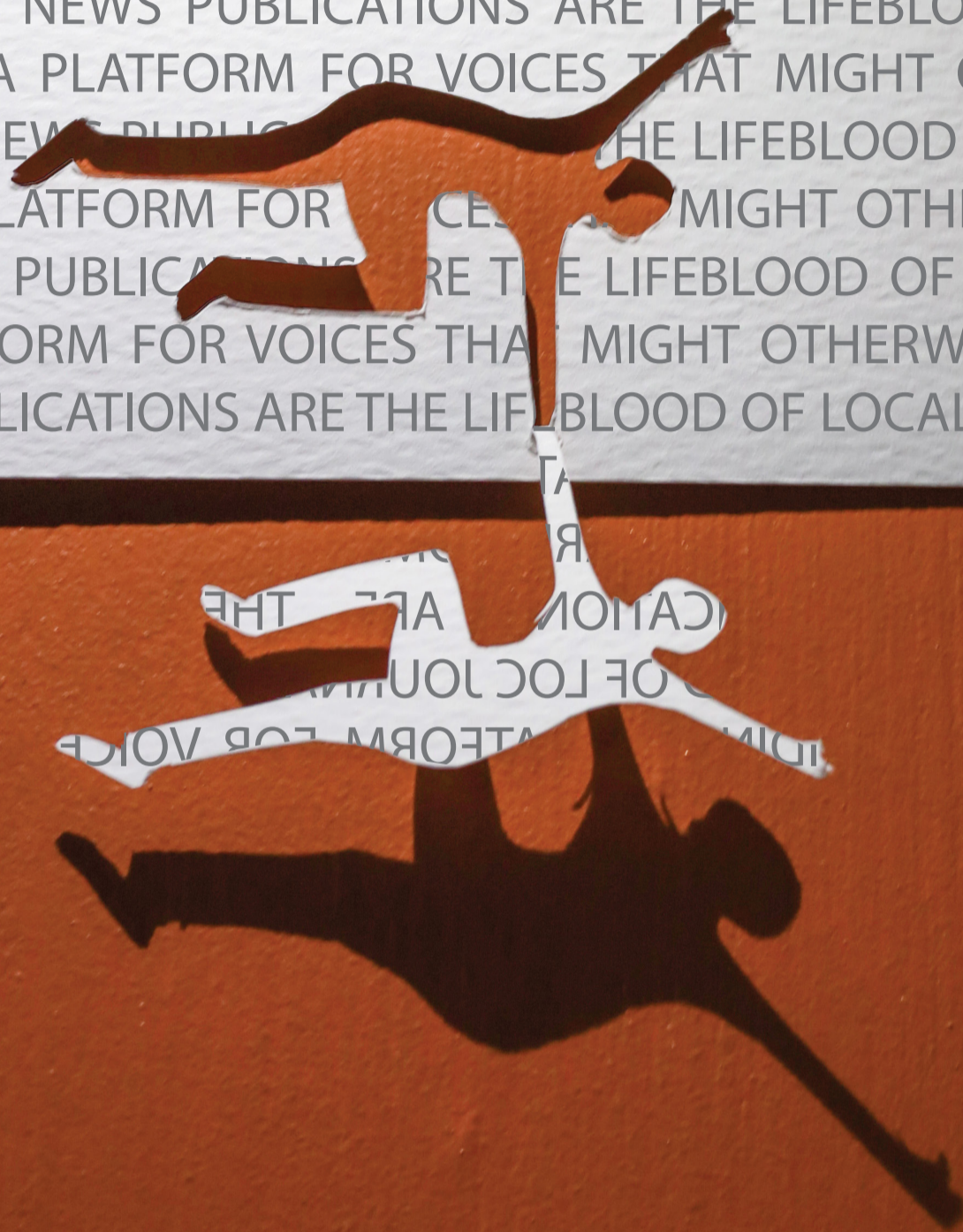
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IN OUR HANDS

Letter from the editor



Kara van der Merwe
Editor-in-Chief

When I was younger, words used to float in the air. They just didn't make sense to me.

In grade three I started wearing big glasses with purple lenses to try and contain these words so that they don't fly away too far. It felt very embarrassing as a child when I was trying to express myself or trying to interpret words on paper. Reading, writing and articulating words used to be my biggest fear.

Looking back at these obstacles, it's a tortured kind of beauty to try and take those

scattered words and string them together sensibly to create something magical with a real impact.

My home town is equally as magical. I think of it as more of a village. It's cosy and familiar. Everyone knows and takes care of one another. It's my safe space.

Greyton is a small town in the Overberg, a 45 minute drive from Hermanus. Some of the most interesting people I've ever met live in Greyton. I don't think it can be confined to a specific cliché. It's not just a small passer-by town. It's not

the hustling, buzzing Stellenbosch. It's just a community of people that came together and stuck together.

It's difficult to explain what it's like to grow up in a small village to people who grew up in cities. My morning traffic consists of cows and horses crossing the road.

The local barista at my favourite coffee shop knows everyone and when I've been away too long, she calls me to ask when I'll be taking my coffee with normal milk and sugar again.

My home town does not

have a community newspaper. Greyton relies on surrounding community publications, national media, as well as social media for news. My town is romanticised in this media, but the local issues are left untouched.

Community publications are how we give voices and a platform to those who would otherwise be left unheard.

With this newspaper, we hope to show you that words are the roots of change and community journalism is the lifeblood that keeps social justice alive.



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“In most of Africa publishers tried to go digital, and it backfired.”

Community newspapers have seen a drop in circulation and print runs, according to Dr Kate Skinner, executive director of the Association of Independent Publishers.
PHOTO: Jodi-Mari Adams

Print publications: Closures, community and circulation

Jodi-Mari Adams

The Covid-19 pandemic drastically impacted the already declining community newspaper print runs and circulation rates, according to Kate Skinner, executive director of the Association of Independent Publishers.

This decline can be linked to the daily economic hardships faced by small towns and rural areas in South Africa, said Skinner. While “things have started to pick up post-Covid”, they are not back to pre-Covid levels”, she added.

Despite these challenges, ensuring the sustainability of community publications is vital, said Skinner. These publications help build communities from the ground up, she said.

“They offer a local perspective, [and] are critical for democracy [as] they hold local business and municipalities [accountable],” she said.

COVID CHALLENGES

Paarl Coldset, a print production company

based in Paarden Eiland, observed a decline of 3% in the number of community newspapers they printed post-pandemic, stated Eugene Ramnarayan, operations manager at Paarl Coldset.

In July 2020, Media24 announced in a statement that the pandemic forced several community newspapers into closure due to a lack of economic viability.

Many of the publications that survived went through a restructuring process and had to merge with other local publications or transitioned onto digital platforms, Media24 stated at the time.

Before Covid, *Loxion News*, a township publication based in Vereeniging, Gauteng, was doing well, according to Fanelo Maseko, the publication's owner and editor.

However, they have now

stopped printing and switched to broadcasting on YouTube.

“We thought, okay, because there is news and we have readers[...] let's go to YouTube, and produce news with video format, and just share it for our readers,” said Maseko.

IN COMPETITION

“Google and Facebook take the lion's share of [online] advertising. [...] The only way to make money is to have a lot of web traffic,” said Skinner. Small publications see lower web traffic because their audiences are smaller than their commercial competitors, she added.

Community publications are also known to face challenges transitioning into a digital market, said Skinner.

Currently, advertising pamphlets are the

main source of revenue for many newspaper publishers, said Ramnarayan.

LACK OF SUPPORT

Community newspapers are a good vehicle for advertisers to tap into local markets, said Angelo Julies, editor of *Eikestadnuus*, a Stellenbosch-based publication.

Government organisations, such as the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), have been unsupportive of community newspapers and have “funded

very few print and online projects”, said Skinner. “[The MDDA] have focused more on community radio than on community print,” added Skinner.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

“In most of Africa publishers tried to go digital, and it backfired,” said Ramnarayan. Due to Africa's digital divide, data inaccessibility has led to many publications returning to printed newspapers, added Ramnarayan.

Residents in townships and underprivileged communities may not have access to the internet or smartphones, explained Julies.

It could take up to 10 years before more affordable provisions for data or fibre are made accessible to all of South Africa, making the shift to digital a difficult goal for the immediate future, said Ramnarayan.

“In my opinion, [community newspapers are] a very important tool,” said Julies. Society will always have a place for these publications, he said.



The next 5 years still look promising for print production, according to Eugene Ramnarayan, operations manager at Paarl Coldset, a print production company based in Paarden Eiland.
PHOTO: Jodi-Mari Adams

Forging local connections

Emma Solomon, Kara van der Merwe & Talia Kincaid

Community news reporting is about more than simply serving the community with facts, said Wayne van der Walt, editor of *Highveldeer News*, a print and online publication owned by Caxton Local Media.

Highveldeer News has remained an integral part of its community for over a century and currently distributes 12 000 copies weekly, said Van der Walt. This was made possible by establishing local connections, he added.

“You have to be a people person to be a community journalist,” said Blake Linder, editor of the *Knysna-Plett Herald*. Van der Walt shared similar views by expressing that local journalists are essentially an “extension of the community that they serve, because [they] also form part of the community”.

Community journalism

remains crucial because it taps into the complexities layered within local experiences, said Hannelie Booyens, former journalist at *Verwoerdburg Nuus*, a community news publication that was based in Centurion.

Highveldeer News' journalists became particularly invested in the journey of Teagan van Wyk, a young cancer patient, as he battled his way through the disease, explained Van der Walt.

The team closely followed Van Wyk's journey over four years, said Van der Walt. “You become a part of these stories,” he said, explaining that after being so invested in Van Wyk's journey, the *Highveldeer News* team was devastated upon learning of his passing.

“We weren't just writing about [Van Wyk], we were also going through all the emotions,” said Van der Walt.

PUTTING HUMANITY FIRST

Becoming invested is not an irregular occurrence, said Van der Walt.

“There are numerous instances where we as journalists and editors have shared in the community's grief over its losses,” he added. “The way I like to see it is I can write about you, and berate you, but I still have to face you the next day in [our local] Spar because we're part of the same community,” said Linder.

Community publications always consider the personal relationships that they have within the community, added Linder.

“We shouldn't just hold up a mirror. We should also hold up a lens through which other perspectives, possibilities and realities [can] come into focus,” said Booyens.



GRAPHIC: Jess Holing



Print's misfortunes



Community publications are responsible for keeping the community up to date on any issues that might directly affect them, according to Roelin D'Amico, the KwaZulu-Natal board director of the Forum of Community Journalists. PHOTO: Jodi-Mari Adams

Michelle Grobbelaar

While demand for national newspapers might have declined over the last decade, community newspapers remain sought after. This is according to Roelin D'Amico, the KwaZulu-Natal board director of the Forum of Community Journalists (FCJ). The demand for community newspapers is linked to the ability of these publications to serve as a voice for the communities in which they are based, said Dave Savides, editor-in-chief of Zululand Observer.

media affecting the demand for community journalism, Caxton Local Media, a multi-media publishing company, believes that "print is not dead", said D'Amico.

"As long as there are local papers to report on issues that affect the community, the paper industry will continue to thrive," stated D'Amico. "People still like to read the paper and keep it for records if their children or families are showcased in them," said Siphiso Siso, the editor of Alex News, which is owned by Caxton Local Media. Alex News is distributed to houses, taxi ranks, police stations and schools in Alexandra, Johannesburg and is also available online, according to Siso.

PRINT LIVES ON

Despite the popularity of digital

FREE NEWSPAPERS

About 158 newspapers nationally

still use the so-called knock-and-drop distribution method, according to a recent report by the Audit Bureau of Circulations.

This method refers to the free distribution of community newspapers to local residents, said Marietta Lombard, the editor-in-chief at Caxton Local Media, and the executive director of FCJ.

Alex News' so-called knock-and-drop distribution average decreased from an average of 19 737 copies to 14 790 fortnightly copies from 2019 to 2022, according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations South Africa.

The team at Alex News ensures that the newspapers are delivered on time by having an in-house distribution service, which utilises company trucks, and runners who hand-deliver papers, said Siso.

The advertisement squeeze

Jan-Hendrik de Villiers

Retrenchments, a lack of revenue, and the aftereffects of Covid-19 have left community newspapers in financially precarious positions, according to Dave Savides, the editor-in-chief of Zululand Observer, a community publication owned by Caxton Local Media.

Part of the reason for this is because "community newspapers are primarily reliant on funding from advertisers", said Ben Burger, deputy executive director of the Forum of Community Journalists (FCJ) Western Cape division.

However, there are two alternative financial models, said Burger. "The first one is what we call a 'free community newspaper, like Eikestadnuus in Stellenbosch. There are also other community newspapers that you have to pay for, like Worcester Standard," said Burger.

Free community newspapers make money through advertisements, while newspapers that have a cover price, also make an income through sales alongside advertising, explained Burger.

incomes, the signs of full recovery are there", said Savides.

Apart from its main office in Empangeni, Zululand Observer has a branch that is operated by one reporter based in eShowe, covering central Zululand, said Savides. There is also a branch in Mtubatuba, where another reporter covers Northern Zululand, added Savides.

During Covid-19, Zululand Observer made a strategic decision to move the Richards Bay branch online and transferred "staff to Empangeni or had them working from home other than on deadline days", said Savides.

Their staff also faced "voluntary retrenchments", said Savides, who added that the publication is still reeling from the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. "We reduced staff from 61 to 49", stated Savides.

BALANCE

The Zoutpansberger, an Afrikaans and English print and digital publication based in Limpopo, has an alternative revenue stream through its cover price, according to Anton van Zyl, the owner and manager of the Zoutpansberger. However, it still relies heavily on advertising, which makes up 90% of its revenue, added Van Zyl.

RECOVERY MODE

Community newspapers are still reeling from the financial challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, said Savides. But for Zululand Observer, "business has done really well over the past 18 months and while we are not yet up to pre-Covid

CORPORATE ADVANTAGE

Income from advertising helps to fund business expenses and overhead costs of community newspapers, said Roelin D'Amico, the KwaZulu-Natal board director of the FCJ, to Michelle Grobbelaar of SMF Newspaper.

One of these examples include the overhead costs of community newspapers that are distributed for free to residents of designated delivery areas, according to D'Amico.



Income from advertising helps to fund business expenses and overhead costs of community newspapers.

Student protest: 'No other means of being heard'

Amy Cloete & Daniel Roodt

Lack of space and time leaves community publications unable to effectively cover student movements, according to Vusi Mthlane a reporter at South Coast Sun, a print and online publication, owned by Caxton Local Media, based in KwaZulu-Natal.

NATURE OF THE PROTESTS

Community publications also tend to focus on protests where property damage occurs, said Mthlane. This is because public property "belongs to the readers, so it is [the paper's] duty to inform them about that", added Mthlane.

"When the protests are more violent, the focus tends to shift to covering that, rather than reasons behind the protests, which become secondary," stated Mthlane.

LACK OF HUMANITY

However, when national publications take on student protest coverage,

there is a tendency for students to be "looked at as statistics", said Lerato Pae, former student representative councillor at Rhodes University.

When students protest, people "tend to forget that there are very serious and valid issues" being voiced, added Pae. "[Students] don't have any other means of being heard."

THE SOLUTION

"Community publications should meet students on the ground to fully understand their issues, to get to hear why they are protesting," said Sifiso Zungu, South African Students Congress (SASCO) Western Cape chair.



"The reality is that when people protest, they don't have any other means of being heard," said Lerato Pae, former student representative councillor at Rhodes University. PHOTO: Jess Holing

Student-run publications: Journalists of the future

Daniel Roodt

Student newspapers are critical in preparing young journalists for the working world and keeping the communities in which they operate well-informed. This is according to Andre Gouws, lecturer at the department of languages and cultural sciences at Akademia, and founding lecturer of the student-run publications SMF News* (previously MatieMedia) and threestreamsmedia.

Both are online publications run by students and are overseen by lecturers from the department of journalism at Stellenbosch University (SU) and North-West University (NWU) respectively, stated Gouws.

INDUSTRY SKILLS

Students get a "real feeling for what the world [of a journalist] is like", explained Gouws. Student-run publications allow students to run their own newsrooms and write content that is published, as a form of "authentic learning", he said.

Working for these publications teaches students valuable skills, stated Gouws.

"[Student news] crafts the skill of seeing the angle and seeing the approach that you can take to deliver something that people want to read, see, or hear," explained Colin Nass, managing editor of Cue, a student-operated publication that is run during

the National Arts Festival in Makhandla. Cue makes use of journalism and media studies students at Rhodes University on a voluntary basis, said Nass.

Cue used to be a print newspaper, stated Nass. In 2022, however, it was distributed digitally in an attempt to "move into the 21st century", explained Nass. "Student news is the only thing that equipped me to source information, contact people, conduct interviews and navigate

trauma," said Janet Heard, managing editor at Daily Maverick. Heard wrote for Rhodéo, an independent student-run publication, when she was attending Rhodes University. "It gave me the groundwork needed to be a reporter," added Heard.

INDUSTRY PREPARATION

New journalists need to adapt quickly to the pressures and demands of a newsroom, so the time spent working in a student-run newsroom is invaluable, said Heard.

"People who have been in student press hit the ground running [when they join a newsroom]," stated Heard. "It helps you not be a rabbit in the headlights."

This is invaluable as "newsrooms don't have time to hold your hand", said Heard.

SERVING LOCALS

"Community news is struggling," stated Gouws. Beyond training future journalists, student-run publications also serve a vital role for the communities they operate in, by covering important stories relevant to the community, he said.

An example of this is when threestreamsmedia embarked on a project to map the potholes in Potchefstroom, to warn



"A lot of students afterwards said this [Cue] was incredibly difficult, but I feel like I could step into any job I need to right now," said Colin Nass, managing editor of Cue. PHOTO: Daniel Roodt

motorists in the city, said Gouws. This was something that "really got the town talking but no other media followed it up", added Gouws.

Financial difficulties are causing publications to downsize their newsrooms, which leads to gaps in the publication of important community news, according to Gouws.

Student-run publications that don't have to worry about advertising and have large newsrooms, can fill this void, explained Gouws.

"SMF News is a sister publication of SMF Newspaper and is also published by the BAHons (Journalism) class of 2023.

Playing a part in history

Thameenah Daniels



"[Community newspapers] address issues and news that affected people directly in their immediate environment," said Prof Albert Grundlingh, retired history lecturer at the University of Stellenbosch. PHOTO: Joseph Bracken

Research has shown that internationally, community newspapers have played the role of the informed messengers for the people, especially during eras where knowledge was not as accessible as it is today, said Prof Lizette Rabe, former chair of the department of journalism at Stellenbosch University (SU), and author of A Luta Continua, a book on the history of media freedom in South Africa.

"Without information, on a very basic and local level, citizens cannot play the role they should in local governments," stated Rabe. "One might argue that in an emerging democracy, community papers, radio stations [and] news websites play an even bigger role," said Rabe.

INFORMED MESSENGERS

The impact of community newspapers in aiding the anti-apartheid struggle cannot be understated, said Monty Roodt, anti-apartheid activist and former journalist for the Daily Mail and the Sunday Tribune.

"[Community newspapers tried] to create a voice against the apartheid government, and showcase the voice of black people," added Roodt. It was through the power of their words that community newspapers were crucial in covering grassroots political activities during apartheid, he added.

CREATING CHANGE

"[Community newspapers] provided information on the nuts and bolts of local societies and often contained what today can be regarded as 'hidden histories' in some form or the other," said Prof Albert Grundlingh, retired history lecturer at SU.

During apartheid, publications like The Herald and Vrye Weekblad informed their communities about current events, including protests, non-governmental organisation's activities, and other important issues, stated Roodt.

The Afrikaans and English press played different roles during apartheid, said Grundlingh. The Afrikaans press often attempted to justify apartheid

whereas the English press were generally more critical of it, he added.

Pro-apartheid community newspapers were also used to push the agendas of the former National Party (NP), said Roodt. The Citizen was funded by the NP to portray their point of view, according to Roodt.

"Ultimately it revolved around power and who should rule the country," said Grundlingh.

THE WAY FORWARD

"A community newspaper is the poor man's advocate," said Lise Beyers, editor of Paarl Post.

"Community newspapers have a responsibility to inform communities of their rights with regards to basic service delivery in their area, and to be their voice to ensure those services really deliver," said Rabe. An informed community is an empowered community, added Rabe.

Serving as watchdogs for local governments is a challenge that community newspapers face when tasked with reporting the stories that usually go unheard, stated Beyers.

It is important that community newspapers continue to hold municipalities accountable, while promoting the management of schools, education, and job creation within communities, said Roodt.



Community newspapers have a responsibility to inform communities of their rights [...] and to be their voice to ensure those services really deliver.

WhatsApp: News central or news crisis?



When people spread misinformation on WhatsApp during times of crisis, it is mainly out of concern to protect their loved ones, explained Cayley Clifford, deputy editor of Africa Check. PHOTO: Mia van der Merwe

Mia van der Merwe

Over 23 million South Africans are WhatsApp users, according to statistics by Tyntec, a German-based signal delivery platform. With this many users, it is important that the correct media literacy is being taught, said Cayley Clifford, deputy editor at Africa Check, a non-profit organisation that focuses on independent fact-checking.

"The impact of half-truths, hoaxes and misleading information can be life-threatening, ranging from the misapplication of funds and poor policymaking, to misdiagnosis and even violence and death," stated Stefan de Villiers, editor of *Lowveld Media*, a division of Caxton Local Media, which publishes nine publications in the Mpumalanga area.

The spread of fake news and misinformation on WhatsApp can have a dire impact on the credibility of a community newspaper, according to Fred Felton, publisher and editor of *Umhlanga Life*, a community magazine in

the Durban area, Umhlanga.

This is because "many journalists will join WhatsApp groups to look out for breaking news stories," said Felton.

POTENTIAL HARM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The community of Hilton in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) mainly relies on WhatsApp for area-specific news, according to Deidre Rautenbach, community member and admin of the community support group, Hilton Buddies. Misinformation is often shared unintentionally, according to Clifford, who added that emotive language helps spread misinformation as it makes it more believable.

"During the riots in KZN, people were emotionally charged and were quick to spread [fake] news that they thought was relevant to the situation," said Rautenbach. It is vital to have a group admin that will fact-check information posted to groups, added Rautenbach.

HANDLING PITFALLS

"As a general rule in our newsroom, we do not regard WhatsApp as a trusted vessel of news," said Yaseen Gaffar, journalist for *District Mail & Helderberg Gazette*, a newspaper that is distributed along Sir Lowry's Pass from Elgin to Somerset West. "We [try to] avoid accepting any unverified source on WhatsApp," said Gaffar.

Media publications must follow strict social media policies and "examine and scrutinise everything to filter out the fake news [from WhatsApp]," before disseminating the information, said Felton.

Lowveld Media's motto is "rather be right than first," stated De Villiers.

DANGERS TO JOURNALISM

News spread on WhatsApp is inevitable and difficult to combat because, "it is wholly unregulated and the information disseminated is totally untested," said Max du

Preez, founder and current editor of *Vrye Weekblad*, a progressive Afrikaans anti-apartheid newspaper founded in 1988.

"Part of WhatsApp's success [at spreading misinformation] is that many people feel an intimacy. They feel they have a source of information that is free of big media manipulation or state control," added Du Preez.



Misinformation is often shared unintentionally.

'WHAT'S CRAP ON WHATSAPP?'

'What's Crap on WhatsApp?', a bi-weekly podcast exclusive to WhatsApp, was created for the purpose of debunking misinfor-

mation, according to Clifford.

The podcast was launched in 2019 by Africa Check in partnership with Volume, a podcasting company with over 20 international and local podcasts, she added.

The hosts send out a voice note in which they debunk the worst misinformation forwarded to them by the podcast subscribers, said Clifford.

SEEING SHOULD NOT BE BELIEVING

Social media platforms have made it easier for misinformation to reach people quickly, said De Villiers.

"Two men in Qatar ingested alcohol-based hand sanitiser and surface disinfectant, thinking it would protect them from the Covid-19 virus due to misinformation that was spread," said Clifford.

Until information can be proven to be true, it "must be treated as inaccurate," said De Villiers.



GRAPHIC: Mia van der Merwe
SOURCE: Africa Check



Part of WhatsApp's success is that many people feel an intimacy. They feel they have a source of information that is free of big media manipulation or state control.



In a study conducted by Africa Check in 2020, it was reported that only 5% of African WhatsApp users reported suspected disinformation to reliable fact-checking organisations.

Many fake messages attempt to incite fear or anger. These messages can include shocking claims about crime, kidnapping, xenophobia or racism.

Messages that have the double arrow icon, mean that they have been forwarded more than 5 times. Even if a message has been shared many times, it does not make it true, according to Africa Check's website.

Fake or fact, the pitfalls of Facebook news

Emma Solomon

The persistence of disinformation and fake news on Facebook threatens the integrity of community publications, said Cayley Clifford, the deputy editor of Africa Check, a non-profit organisation. Africa Check has also done independent fact-checking with Facebook's parent company, Meta.

However, Facebook does contribute to community journalism as it can be used as a source of information, said Blake Linder, news editor of *The Knysna-Plett Herald*, a weekly community newspaper, owned by Caxton Local Media. But, information from Facebook must be treated with caution, he added.

FACT-CHECK FACEBOOK

"So many people are using social

media as a source of news and I do not think that is an inherently bad thing – as long as you are aware that not everything you are seeing is true," said Clifford.

Facebook has "various tools and algorithms to detect the likelihood of something being fake," said Clifford. But fake news shared on private community groups cannot be fact-checked, Clifford added.

An organization like Africa Check will publish a report on detected fake information "and Facebook will demote that post in people's news feeds," she explained.

"[The false information] will stay on the platform with a label to say that it has been fact-checked by a fact-checking organization and they found it to be false," said Clifford.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS
Under the Disaster Management Act, the distribution of fake news about Covid-19 and the government's reaction to it was considered a criminal offense, said Emma Sadleir, media lawyer and founder of The Digital Law Company.

Sharing "fake news can really fall into just about any different category of legal implication of publication", stated Sadleir.

Individuals can be prosecuted for these legal implications, which include "privacy infringement, defamation, hate speech [or] sharing fake news which leads to incitement of harm or violence to a person or damage to property", said Sadleir.

Whether you share fake news or disinformation unconsciously or

intentionally, "the same applies", explained Sadleir.

"We live in a post-truth era and I think it falls on every individual user to stop [the spread of fake news]," said Sadleir. Before one presses the share button "presume everything you receive is nonsense until you can go and prove that it is true", she added.

IDENTIFYING DISINFORMATION

Understanding what a credible source is and checking "if mainstream news providers are carrying the same story", help identify disinformation, stated Sadleir.

"Often disinformation is designed to play on our emotions, and you are, [therefore], much

more likely to forward it on," Clifford stated.

Even when news is posted on Facebook by a person you know or someone who has previously provided valuable and trustworthy information, it is imperative to fact-check it, according to Linder.

COMPETING FOR VIEWS

Community news publications often find themselves in competition with social media platforms such as Facebook, stated Linder.

"You're never going to be first [to publish a story] compared to Facebook, especially as a weekly newspaper," said Linder. But, community news has the opportunity to "tell the story in its entirety [...] more often than not, what you get on Facebook is only a portion of the story", added Linder.

FAST FACTS:

Fake-news and disinformation are "terms [that can be] used interchangeably", said Cayley Clifford, deputy editor of Africa Check.

Fake-news can refer to any false information, or fake and manipulated content", said Clifford. This includes disinformation, said Clifford.

Disinformation can be defined as "false information that is spread with the intention to deceive", whereas misinformation is "spread by people who do not necessarily know what they are sharing is false", added Clifford.



Facebook "is a great way for us to reach the community", stated Blake Linder, news editor of *The Knysna-Plett Herald*. However, the trustworthiness of the platform "is a bit of a grey area so we do treat it with a lot of caution", said Linder. PHOTO: Emma Solomon

The digital conundrum

Liam Voorma

With the rapid rise of online news consumption, changing consumer preferences and declining circulation, the print industry is struggling to adapt and remain financially viable. This is according to Angelo Julies, editor at *Eikestadmus*, a Media24-owned community newspaper based in Stellenbosch.

"The rise of free online news sources, social media platforms, and citizen journalism has intensified competition for traditional print newspapers," stated Julies.

THE ONLINE SHIFT

In order to compete with digital media, print publications are pressured to adopt a multimedia approach to capitalise on rising trends, according to Nicole Rimbault, operations director of the *Knysna-Plett Herald*.

The *Knysna-Plett Herald*, owned by Caxton Local Media, has been in publication since

1984 and shifted their print publication online in 2010 following a shift in the behavioural patterns of their readers and consumers, said Rimbault. Roughly 60% of their readership is now online, she said.

"Even if your print product is doing well, you still need to branch out because your audience wants so much more, such as videos, audio and podcasts," said Chantel Erfort, editor-in-chief at Africa Community Media (ACM).

BENEFITS OF ONLINE

The internet and social media allow online publications to have a wider reach compared to print publications, according to Julies. For instance, *Eikestadmus* is available on the Netwerk24 online platform, which makes it available to a national audience, added Julies.

Features such as comments, social media sharing, and

multimedia content allow for online publications to have a more interactive experience for readers which results in a greater reach, said Julies.

"Online publications are also more cost effective than print publications because it requires lower production and distribution costs compared to print newspapers," according to Julies.

Online news also has the benefit of timeliness, said Julies. "Online publications can be

updated in real-time, allowing for immediate news coverage," he added.

THE POWER OF PRINT

However, newspapers offer a certain sense of credibility, according to Erfort.

"With online news you're able to edit and republish. You do not have that luxury with print. You have to get it right the first time," said Erfort.

Currently, ACM has a higher print readership than online due to their distribution model, said Erfort. ACM has close to 13 community titles, an online platform and distributes 694 000 printed copies weekly within the Western Cape area, according to Erfort.

Whilst ACM was unable to provide exact numbers, they are currently working on expanding their online readership, she added.



With online news you're able to edit and republish. You do not have that luxury with print, you have to get it right the first time.



Keeping local governments accountable

Kara van der Merwe

Community news reporting is neglected by the South African media industry, which tends to favour metropolitan areas. This is according to Max du Preez, founder and editor of *Vrye Weekblad*.

The deterioration of governance and service delivery are first and foremost acutely felt by citizens on a local level, said Du Preez. Communities are underrepresented and underreported within mainstream media, said Dr Dinesh Balliah, director at Witwatersrand University's centre for journalism. "The gaps in servicing public opinion [...] are supposed to be filled in by community newspapers and radio stations," said Du Preez. "It is impossible to overstate the importance of community newspapers," said Wayne van der Walt, editor of *Highvelders News*, a community newspaper based in Ermelo, Mpumalanga. It distributes 12 000 free newspapers weekly, according to Van der Walt.

HOLDING PEOPLE IN POWER ACCOUNTABLE

"Community media have the potential to keep local governments and individual city and town councils accountable in a way that mainstream media can't," said Du Preez. "Community newspapers have shown that this segment of the

media can be first in picking up local corruption, dereliction of duty and abuse of power," explained Du Preez. South Africa's democracy is built on a free and autonomous press, said Van der Walt.

This is why community publications are important to ensure that the populace is informed about the actions of the people they elect, stated Van der Walt. "Without the media highlighting these issues, we aren't able to move forward in terms of our democracy," said Balliah.

This highlights the importance of community journalism, not just on a political level, but in terms of the cultural and social aspects of communities, she said.

EDITORIAL ISSUES

However, a community newspaper is only as good as the foundation that editors and mentors have "laid down over decades", stated Van der Walt.

There is a lack of hard community news across the board, said Balliah. There is not a large enough focus on community crime statistics and investigations at a local municipal level, she stated.

"With a few notable exceptions, most community media are more interested in pandering to advertisers, especially local businesses, than in informing citizens of the real issues," said Du Preez.

FUNDING PROBLEMS

The local media that are not owned

by media conglomerates are often unable to secure funding to invest in high quality reporters and often rely on handouts, said Du Preez. This contributes significantly to the challenges faced by many local community members in that too many local newspapers are owned by national media companies with a strict mandate to only make a profit, added Du Preez.

A further challenge posed to community publications is the hiking of print prices, according to Dr Kate Skinner, executive director of The Association for Independent Publishers (AIP). "[This] makes it extremely difficult for publications to survive," she said.

AIP is a national organisation that currently has 226 registered

publications, said Skinner. It focusses on advancing the interests of South Africa's local grassroots independent print media sector, said Skinner.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

"Since [*Highvelders News*] has been in print for more than a century, it is crucial to remember that, in order to gain and maintain the trust of the community, being a community newspaper entails more than simply serving that community's needs. Instead you are a part of the community you serve," said Van der Walt.

The purpose of community media is not to have huge audiences, but to focus on local audiences and build that commitment to report the truth, said Skinner.

"Broadcasting, print and online [media] tend to focus on the big stories, political and otherwise. The smaller cities and township issues don't get much media attention," said Du Preez. Although community media are obligated to "expose the different communities and their lifestyles, cultures and problems in their region to each other", there is not much of that being done, added Du Preez.



PHOTOS: Supplied GRAPHIC: Jess Holing

Max du Preez, founder and current editor of *Vrye Weekblad*.

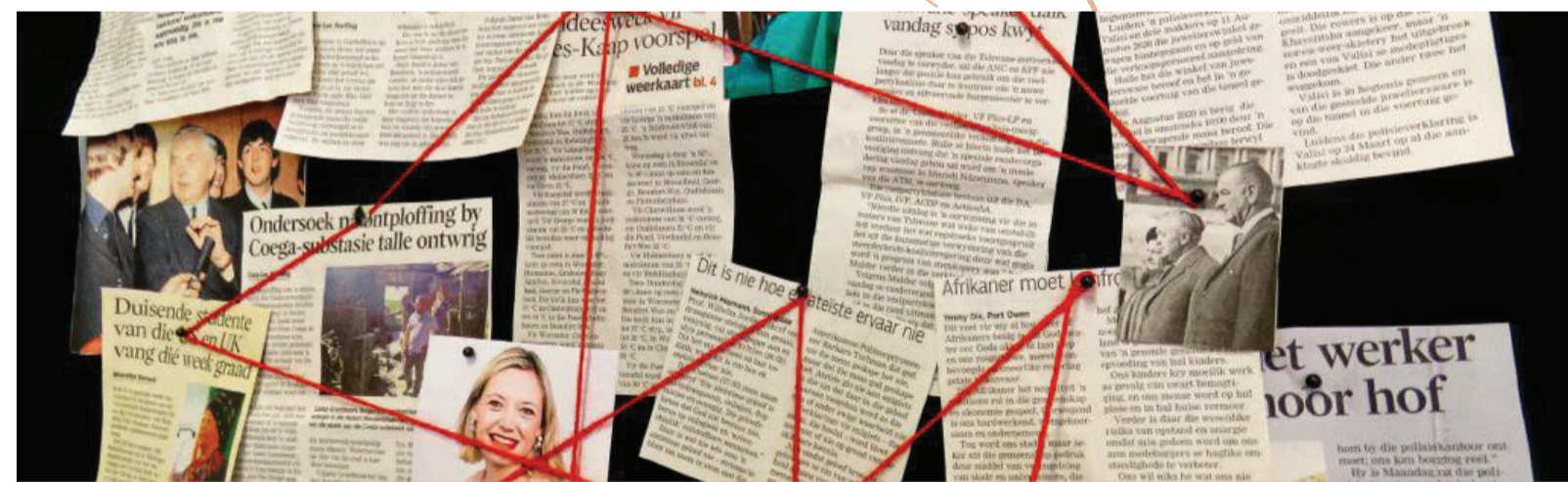
Dr Dinesh Balliah, director at Witwatersrand University's centre for journalism.

Wayne van der Walt, editor of *Highvelders News*, Mpumalanga.

Dr Kate Skinner, executive director of The Association for Independent Publishers (AIP).

Beyond 'surface-level' reporting

Liza-May Pieters



"Investigative journalism is important for public accountability, consumer protection and guard railing global governance," said Prof Thuli Madonsela, the law trust chair in social justice at Stellenbosch University's centre for social justice, and the former public protector of South Africa. PHOTO: Liza-May Pieters

An increase in investigative journalism on a community level means "more eyes on hidden wrongdoings", according to Prof Thuli Madonsela, the law trust chair in social justice at Stellenbosch University's (SU) centre for social justice, and the former public protector of South Africa. "As public protector, we relied enormously on information from investigative journalism, which we used as guides on what evidence to dig for

through subpoenas and related forensic means," said Madonsela.

Investigations on a local level help communities "overcome hurdles such as institutional capture and bribery, where there is monopoly over accountability authority", stated Madonsela.

VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Stories that affect vulnerable communities, like the ones

that *GroundUp* covers, are too important to sit behind a paywall, said Colleen Monaghan, development and operations manager at the online news platform, *GroundUp*. This is why *GroundUp* has a "creative commons licence", which means that other publications can republish *GroundUp* articles for free as long as they are credited, explained Monaghan.

Community level investigations means "more accountability from people in govern-

ment, especially on the local ward councillor level", said Monaghan.

FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

"We have never really been in a position to blow the lid off what is really going on," stated Rod Amner, education editor at *Grocott's Mail*, a publication run by Rhodes University journalism students and staff members, based in Makhanda, Eastern

Cape. Their lack of in-depth investigations is largely due to financial reasons and a shortage of employees as the "economy in the town is very small, especially after Covid", said Amner.

THABO BESTER

The case of Thabo Bester, a convicted rapist and murderer, is one instance of how investigations done by local journalists had a direct impact on the community, said Monaghan.

This case would have remained a "secret of the criminal syndicate behind it, while society had a false sense of security [by believing] that he died in a suicidal fire in May 2022", said Madonsela.

Local journalists at *GroundUp* broke the story of Bester's escape after receiving a tip-off and they pursued the story from there, said Monaghan.

The "large grants from institutional funders" given to journalists at *GroundUp*, allow them to devote more time to investigating stories, explained Monaghan. This means that there is less pressure on journalists to just do "surface level stories", to meet commercial demands, she added.

Funding intimidation halts journalistic investigations

Daniel Roodt & Liza-May Pieters

Intimidation and a lack of funding has left community news publications unable to conduct thorough investigative journalism.

This is according to Rod Amner, education editor at *Grocott's Mail*, an online community publication based in Makhanda, Eastern Cape. The publication has a monthly online viewership of 23 000 people, according to Amner.

In-depth investigations at a community level are important as "it ensures that people in power keep their promises", stated Saai Mahlangu, a news reporter at *Mpumalanga Press*, a free print and digital publication. *Mpumalanga Press* produces between 6 000 and 15 000 copies monthly, according to the publication.

NO MONEY

Many community publica-

tions do not have the capacity to run long investigations due to a lack of advertising revenue, according to Amner.

Grocott's Mail is currently run by less than 10 inexperienced post-graduate students and two to three lecturers from the school of journalism and media studies at Rhodes University, said Amner. Conversely, *Grocott's Mail* employed 50 people in 2004 when the university took over the publication for the purposes of training journalism students, according to Amner.

This problem is not unique to *Grocott's Mail*.

"There's not enough resources to do proper investigations, as most newspapers struggle to access funding," said Nkosiyabo Max Mxabo, owner and publisher of *Pondo News*.

Pondo News is a weekly isiXhosa publication produced in Kokstad, KwaZulu-Natal, with a circulation of 10 000 readers, stated Mxabo. The publication employs three full-time journalists and four freelancers, and are able to conduct a few investigations per year, according to Mxabo.

"We don't have forensic abilities," said Amner. "We're overworked and there is too much to

do, meaning there is no way we can do it properly."

INTIMIDATION & THREATS

Local reporters occasionally face backlash from people in the community they try to investigate, said Mxabo. "At times, [journalists] do get intimidation from individuals, especially politicians or senior government officials."

There have also been anecdotal stories of politicians withholding advertising from newspapers in response to negative coverage, stated Mxabo. This only further hinders publications' abilities to conduct thorough investigations, as many are struggling to stay afloat, according to Mxabo.

CREATING CHANGE

Despite funding challenges, some community publications have been able to conduct meaningful investigative journalism. The *Knysna-Plett Herald*, a print and online publication, exposed one of the municipal managers for committing irregular expenditure, according to Chris du Plessis, former editor of the *Knysna-Plett Herald*.

The publication has "repeatedly exposed municipal officials for irregular expenditure, in some cases involving tens of millions of rand. Several of them have since vacated their posts," said Du Plessis.



"The idea that a rag-tag group made up of some lecturers and students can conduct thorough investigations is pie in the sky," said Rod Amner (pictured above), education editor of *Grocott's Mail*, a publication run by the school of journalism and media studies at Rhodes University. PHOTO: Daniel Roodt

“We’re overworked and there is too much to do.”

“Grocott’s is not part of a bigger company that could absorb losses,” said Rod Amner, education editor of *Grocott’s Mail*, a publication run by the Rhodes University, school of journalism and media studies. Pictured is the old *Grocott’s Mail* building, where the publication used to operate out of. PHOTO: Daniel Roodt

The power of hyperlocal grassroots reporting

Tapiwanashe Zaranyika



"The youth is very curious about sports, crime-related stories, school stories and other important events in the community. *False Bay Echo* has found a way to provide the youth with the important information online and in print," said Bobby Jordan, senior reporter at the *Sunday Times*. PHOTO: Tapiwanashe Zaranyika

The value of hyperlocal journalism lies within its ability to cover national news in a local context, said Chantel Erfort, editor-in-chief of Africa Community Media, the publisher of *False Bay Echo*. *False Bay Echo* distributes 31 590 newspapers to 20 communities within the Southern Peninsula, according to Erfort.

"During the early days of the Covid lockdowns, the newspaper was committed [to] reporting on the global pandemic in a way that was useful to local audiences," said Erfort.

By telling the stories of local community members on the frontlines, *False Bay Echo* continued to keep people in touch

with their communities when the physical barriers Covid-19 presented, withheld them from physically being with one another, added Erfort.

“It is often tricky and difficult to get under the skin of a particular community without being from there.”

The newspaper localised the national problem of loadshedding by focusing on the financial implications it posed to small local businesses, said Yolanda du Preez, a journalist at *False Bay Echo*.

GRASSROOTS JOURNALISM

False Bay Echo uses grassroots journalism to address the gaps in the reporting of community organisations, and consults local experts for input on future stories or issues, said Erfort.

Grassroots journalism focuses on local angles or "reporting on how national or international issues may affect a particular community", said Tahlia Wyn-

gaard, a resident of the Ocean View community. Wyngaard is also a freelancer for Global Network Africa, a media company that publishes print and digital content in the financial sector, according to their website.

Grassroots journalists use their community ties to sustain relationships with a wide variety of sources from these different areas, said Erfort.

LOCAL SOURCES ARE KEY

Sourcing local contacts is an advantage to the publication because these are people who are aware of the issues being faced by that particular community, said Bobby Jordan, a senior re-

porter at the *Sunday Times*.

"It is often tricky and difficult to get under the skin of a particular community without being from there," said Jordan, who added that finding reliable sources can be difficult for an outsider who will not have the same ties to the community.

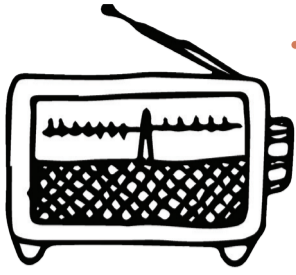
THE WEEKLY DRILL

False Bay Echo finds that because publishing and distributing a weekly paper has time constraints, breaking news is covered by larger publications who report everyday, said Du Preez.

Newspapers struggle to remain up-to-date as news often only gets published a week after the story has happened, said Erfort.



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Financial pressures threaten longevity of community radio

Talia Kincaid

Community radio in South Africa (SA) boasts a healthy audience of over 8.5 million weekly listeners across approximately 290 stations, according to the Broadcast Research Council's (BRC) Radio Audience Measurement Survey (RAMS). But stations are facing looming closures due to financial pressures, said Dr Tanja Bosch, professor of media studies at the University of Cape Town.

"There is simply not enough money to go around and service all the existing radio stations in SA," said Bosch.

"When community radio stations were set up, they relied on volunteers who offered their labour for free, [but] these days the current economic climate makes it difficult to keep recruiting."

Even Bush Radio, SA's oldest community radio station, according to the Journal of Radio Studies, is facing financial precarity, said Brenda Leonard, Bush Radio's operations manager. Established in 1992 as an alternative broadcaster, Bush programmes in English, Afrikaans, and isiXhosa from central Cape Town.

CONFRONTING CHALLENGES

"Community radio's funding will always be a challenge," said Gool-

am Fakier, radio presenter at Voice of the Cape. "As community broadcaster[s], we have [no] board of directors, investors or funders."

Bush Radio's funding model consists of grants, training fees, sponsorships, and advertising, according to Leonard.

"There were times where people might not be paid for the month, but they still rock[ed] up to work," said Leonard. "Covid-19 hit community media very hard [and many] businesses stopped advertising, or reduced their [advertising] budget."



There were times where people might not be paid for the month, but they still rock[ed] up to work.

An additional challenge is paying Sentech, SA's state-owned communications network service provider, said Leonard. Sentech provides 150 national community stations with broadcasting transmission services for approximate-

ly R180 000 per station yearly, according to their website.

"[National] community broadcasting is in arrears with Sentech for R100 million," stated Leonard, who added that Sentech has had to suspend community stations due to an accumulation of insufficient payments. Meeting notes from the Parliamentary Monitoring Group confirmed that community radio accounted for R60 million of this debt.

STATISTICAL INACCURACIES

"[Bush] doesn't feel that the BRC speaks to our audiences. It takes a certain level of media literacy to participate [and] we have a lot of listeners in informal settlements [who cannot partake in the BRC's surveys] which immediately cuts our audiences," explained Leonard.

BRC RAMS' 2022 national survey found that Bush Radio's audience comprised 59 000 listeners within a 7-day period, but an independent survey conducted by Bush placed their listenership at 275 000, according to Bush Radio's website. Advertisers reduce their airtime rates based on the BRC's recorded figures, said Leonard.

Social media has also become a source of contention for Bush Radio as advertisers are hesitant to invest in online audiences,



Shifting the narrative of community radio's audience from marginalised to group-specific will assist them in retaining advertisers, said Brenda Leonard, Bush Radio's operations manager. PHOTO: Talia Kincaid

added Leonard.

"If we look at Bush's Facebook of 22 000 followers, we should charge 10% of that audience [for R2 200]," said Leonard. "But [the advertisers] say no, that's too expensive [...] Eventually, we sell for R1 000 which is half of what we should be selling."

A COMMUNITY FORCE

"We try to sell a story – a connection," stated Leonard.

Voice of the Cape echoes this ethos. "[Community radio is about being] on the ground. We know what the issues are, and we bring these issues to light," said Fakier.

About 70% of Bush Radio's content programming is produced by volunteers from the community, said Leonard, who added that the station reflects a safe space for community members to feel heard by getting involved.

SMF CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Hints

Down

- Written or spoken by humans.
- To give someone more control over their life.
- The obligation or willingness to accept responsibility for one's actions. ("Yes, it was me.")
- A broadcast medium.
- Gutenberg invented this machine.
- When you have an aim or intention in mind you have a...? (Also a Justin Bieber album title)
- SMF editor-in-chief's home town.
- A social media website where you can poke a friend.

Across

- To alter/modify something to make it different. (It is as good as a holiday!)
- When a newspaper is available online, it is sometimes referred to as the ... version?
- Cayley Clifford is the deputy editor of what organisation?
- A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.
- A person writing an article for a newspaper.
- Community news publications' biggest obstacle.
- Protective rails (a fence or other obstacle that prevents movement, access or growth).
- The sound produced in a person's larynx and uttered through the mouth, as speech or song.
- 90.6fm's previous host's surname.
- The main means of mass communication (papers, TV, radio etc.) regarded collectively.
- Intense sorrow, especially caused by someone's death.
- This newspaper's title.

