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The value of values: Balancing journalism quality and business viability in dynamic, under resourced media ecosystems

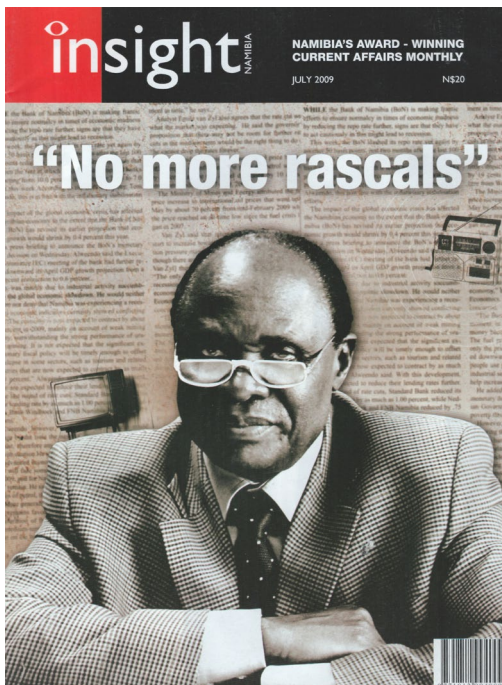
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insight NAMIBIA
Face The Facts

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Introduction: *Does good journalism sell?*

This question has bugged me throughout the four decades I have been a journalist, media entrepreneur and development worker. It germinated as I started out on the *Hastings Observer* (on the south coast of the UK), where I completed my NCTJ proficiency test (National Council for the Training of Journalists) in 1987. The paper was one of the first in Britain to abandon “hot metal” presses, and the backdrop to my indentureship was Rupert Murdoch’s battle with the print unions over the introduction of similar technology. Mr Murdoch’s papers made money, but at what cost to the quality of their journalism? At the *Hastings Observer*, a code of ethics was hardwired into our contracts, my editor defended me when my stories riled advertisers, and I was always paid at the end of the month. But did my stories help sell the paper?

I encountered a completely different reality when I joined *The Namibian* newspaper in 1988 at the tail end of apartheid South Africa’s occupation of Namibia. Advertisers shunned and opponents bombed the paper for its pro-independence political stance that attracted tens of thousands of devoted readers. Nevertheless, the paper was dependent on grants from international aid agencies until several years after Namibia’s independence, by which time I felt that some of the fire had gone out of its journalism.



In 1993 I joined MISA (the Media Institute of Southern Africa), a new body for the region’s emergent independent media that were struggling to make ends meet. MISA in-turn set up SAMDEF (South African Media Development Fund: project 1) as part of its mission to promote sustainable press freedom.





Yet, it was difficult to defend the quality of some of the journalism that MISA's members produced and which countless donor-funded training workshops did little to improve. As someone living with HIV, I personally felt alienated by my fellow journalists' typically shallow, inaccurate and stigmatising coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in southern Africa at a time when one in five adults was infected with HIV, and thousands were dying of AIDS each week. On the back of my MA dissertation (Lush, 2000), colleagues and I piloted participatory methods for people living with HIV to tell a different narrative through media. These story tellers, both children and adults, produced journalism that I found refreshing and profound, but media colleagues dismissed it as unprofessional. And it certainly did not sell. Not so *Insight*, the current affairs magazine that three colleagues and I launched in 2004 (project 2). We swept Namibia's journalism awards for several years in a row, while generating a small profit without taking a cent of donor funding. So, good journalism could sell, for a while at least!

On joining IMS (International Media Support) in 2012 as its Head of Learning, I helped put viable public interest journalism at the centre of the organisation's strategy. Now it is there, I want to look for empirical evidence that begins to answer my career-defining question, in the hope that the answer is 'yes, good journalism can sell' and we avoid repeating past mistakes.



Retrospective Project 1: *Activists and Philanthropists*

Viability at the expense of quality? Lessons from the Southern African Media Development Fund (SAMDEF)

This project examines value created through quality journalism from the perspective of those using government and philanthropic funds to invest in media in a dynamic, under resourced media ecosystem.



SAMDEF was established by MISA in 1995 to strengthen the viability of independent media outlets that started springing up during the wave of democratisation that followed the end of the Cold War. I witnessed SAMDEF from close quarters, first as a MISA employee and then as a representative of SAMDEF's main philanthropic funder. SAMDEF did not live up to the expectations of its donors and some of MISA's founders, partly because it was perceived to favour commercial viability over the kind public interest journalism that MISA and the donors sought to sustain. As a result, SAMDEF's funding dried up in 2009 (Phiri, 2017).

Retrospective Project 2: *Journalist Entrepreneurs*

A holy grail or same old story? Namibia's Insight magazine

This project examines value created through quality journalism from the perspective of journalists and media entrepreneurs in a dynamic, under resourced media ecosystem. In 2004, three colleagues and I pooled our personal savings to set up *Insight*, a monthly current affairs magazine for the Namibian market. We wanted to see if we could viably publish the kind of in-depth, quality journalism we aspired to write – but in which other Namibian media seemed have little interest - without having to go cap-in-hand to lenders or philanthropic donors. For several years, *Insight* won awards and made a small profit. But we lacked the time and investment to take the business to another level, and gradually both the awards and the profit margins diminished until the magazine folded a decade after we launched it, by which time most of its founders had moved on.



Prospective Project 3: The Value of Values

Stakeholders in Public Interest Media: understanding the interrelationship between viability and journalistic quality in media development interventions.

For my 'live' project, I plan to use the following combination of qualitative methods (Lune, 2013; Billups, 2021) to compare the values that key stakeholders in a sample of 2-3 media operations from different countries attach to journalism quality, and the value these stakeholders derive from this quality. The media operations will all receive support from media development agencies. My data collection strategies are:

1. Participatory stakeholder and power analysis (Mayers, 2005; Brouwer *et al.*, 2012). In a facilitated workshop, a purposive sample of staff from each of the media operations map the main stakeholders in each media operation's journalism and the value flows and value gaps (Olsen, 2021) between each stakeholder.

2. News Game and focus groups (Kitzinger, 1990; Lush, 2000), Using a set of photographs as prompts, a purposive sample of people from each of the three most influential stakeholder groups in each country will co-produce a story that, from their perspective, represents quality journalism. They will then discuss the values they attach to this quality, and the value they derive from it.

3. Design sprint: Based on the findings of the News Games and focus group discussions for their respective countries, journalists from each media operation will design a prototype quality journalism product through a facilitated design thinking process (Gürsoy, 2020; Magistretti *et al.*, 2021). The journalists' brief will be to incorporate into their product the values the stakeholders attach to quality journalism in a way that enhances the value the stakeholders derive from it. Then, each media operation tests and iterates their journalism products to see if they do create value and how this value can be captured (see for example, Blum-Ross *et al.*, 2013).

Synopsis

I will look at findings across the three projects to identify trends and differences, and how these relate to the literature on public interest journalism and media viability. I will be using reflexive narrative (Johns, 2022) to re-examine what I and my SAMDEF and *Insight* colleagues understood as quality journalism and the value we thought this created at the time. From this analysis, I will draw conclusions about the applicability of Olsen's (2021) and Costera Meijer's (2022) models in dynamic, under-resourced media ecosystems, as well as the study's aims and objectives and the implications the study has for the work of media development agencies.


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JQRSS Author Profiles

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François Nel³ is a media innovation specialist in journalism and a National Teaching Fellow (HEA). He is also on the leadership team of the UCLan Research Centre for Digital Life.

Collegial Review

The author cleverly uses his introduction to engage us in his core question, *does good journalism sell?* In so doing, he succinctly captures the historical, political and economic factors that have contributed to the tension which he has observed between value-driven, public interest 'good' journalism, and the often conflicting need for journalism to be profitable, or at the very least commercially viable with support from grant funding. At the same time, he seamlessly weaves his own very personal experience of the stigmatising way that the HIV/AIDS epidemic was covered by his fellow journalists in South Africa. This gives the reader a strong sense of empathy for the many people affected by HIV/AIDS at the time, as well as providing a very powerful example of the social damage that can be caused by poor journalism.

The aim to collaboratively ascertain the values that key stakeholders associate with their own understanding of what 'quality journalism' looks like, whilst also reflecting on what he and his colleagues perceived as high quality, and 'valuable' journalism during the two historical projects, demonstrates a humility and openness in the author's approach. Combining these two bodies of international journalism experience with his obvious expertise and passion for his field, this PhD by Portfolio research will have impact not only within the organisations cited above, as they continue in their respective missions, but also provide a fascinating and refreshing take on how high quality journalism could and definitely should be commercially viable.