

Local media and digital frontiers

Swaziland Community Multimedia Network

The continued dominance of traditional journalism practice in the Swazi media landscape is under threat from two recent developments: new media and community media. The two are on the verge of introducing the bottom-up approach, interactivity and activism sought by many Swazis, especially marginalised, voiceless groups. Major hurdles prevent the realization of the opportunities they offer citizens, however, because of several challenges.

Community media, radio in particular, and new media have a history in Swaziland dating back to the 1990s and 2000s. “We were one of the first applicants to the authorities for a community radio licence more than 15 years ago. We are still waiting,” said Ambrose Zwane, Lubombo community radio coordinator. Zwane is currently working together with several others to advocate for licensing and seek technical skills, equipment and funding for the community radio sector.

Geographically, there are community radio initiatives in Shiselweni, Mankayane and Mbabane while those that represent “communities of interest” include the University of Swaziland campus radio – an initiative of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication. Others are Christian faith-based initiatives including the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Council of Swaziland Churches and Trans World Radio’s Voice of the Church (VOC) – the latter being the only one that is operational.

Two years ago, they registered an umbrella body, termed the Swaziland Community Multimedia Network. “Our goal is to operate as a

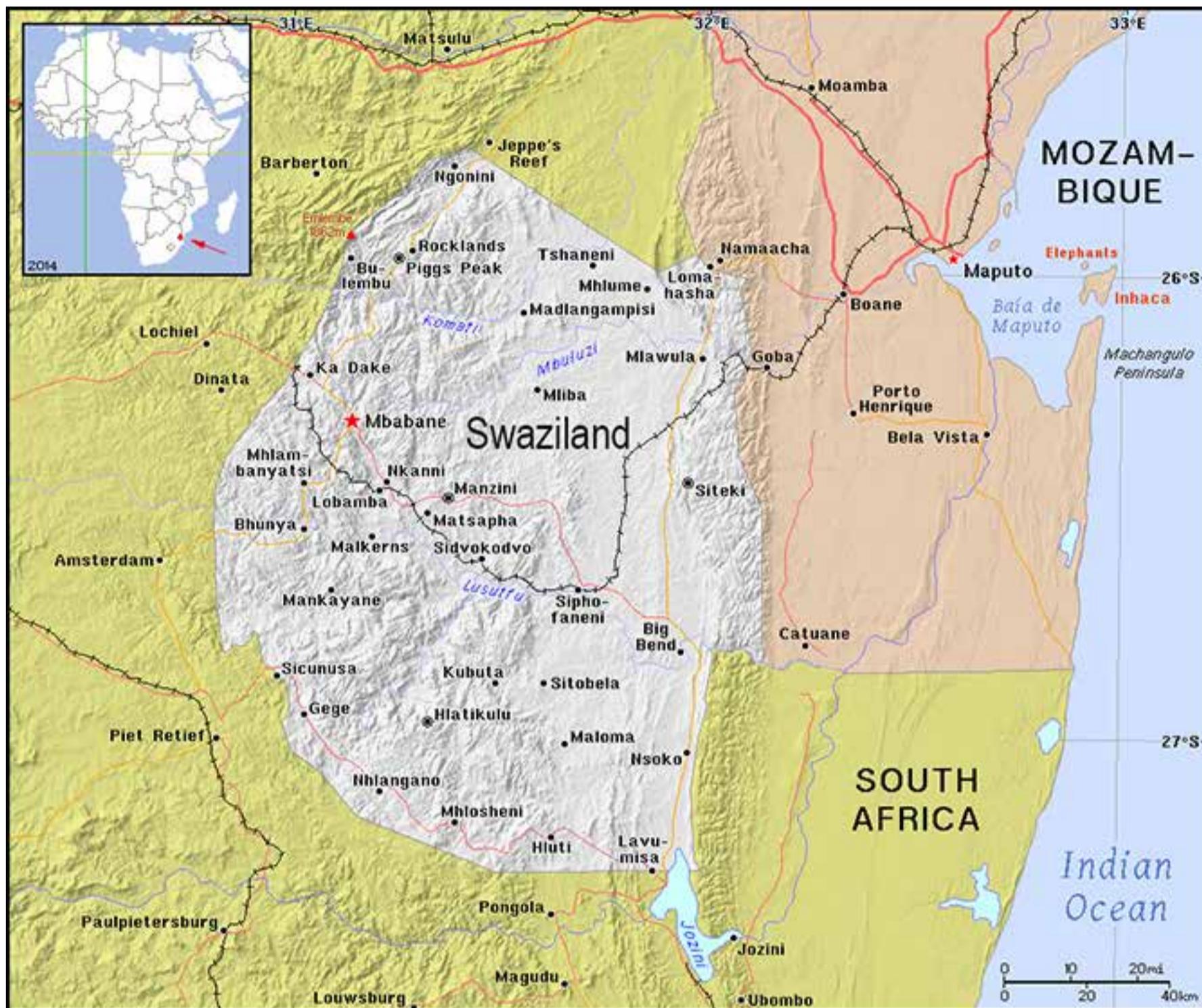
third-tier within the Swazi broadcasting industry, alongside public service and commercial radio stations,” added Zwane. A commercial online broadcaster, Sikhuphe radio, which was operating online but was forced to cease operating, has joined the advocacy group.

New media are more difficult to quantify because they exist on various platforms, are managed by individuals, non-profits and corporations, but not coordinated or regulated in a systematic way. For example, traditional media institutions such as local newspaper publishers of the Times of Swaziland and Swazi Observer maintain websites through which news content is disseminated. Social media tools, such as Facebook and Whatsapp, are also widely used by individuals, civil society, corporations, and various civil society organisations in the country.

Evidence of their increasing reach and uptake is anecdotal, since it is an area that still requires thorough research. However, the potential of new media in Swaziland is clearly outlined in a 2012 publication by the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA): “In a country where the mainstream media is highly censored, the new media and social media are now considered as an alternative platform for the free flow of information.”

Despite international trends, Swaziland is one of a few southern African states that have not freed their airwaves, which limits plurality in the broadcasting sector. MISA (2012) notes unremarkable change in the broadcast media sector in recent times. “The Swaziland Broadcasting and Information Services (SBIS), which controls radio, and Swaziland Television Authority, television, remain the two dominant players – the only two players, really.” The major obstacle is a non-conducive legislative and regulatory environment, forcing community and commercial radio to remain illegitimate.

However, the status quo has begun to improve in recent times. A positive sign was the establishment of an independent communications regulator (Swaziland Communications Commission) in 2013. Its goal is to regulate and supervise electronic communications network operations and the provision of related services, including



the regulation of data protection in electronic communications. The Ministry of Information, Communication and Technology is also finalising drafting of broadcasting legislation. According to the Director of Information, Phesheya Dube, the passing of these Bills by Parliament will introduce the three-tier system of public service, commercial and community broadcasting promoted by the Ministry. This will provide opportunities for Swazis to access a multiplicity of media content or establish their own radio and television stations.

Digital migration's advent is also accelerating legislative and regulatory processes within the broadcasting sector. In addition, the teaming up of Swazi community radios and civil society to implement an advocacy campaign for the passing of broadcasting legislation is becoming a force to be

reckoned with. Themed, "*Licence community radios: realize Vision 2022*," the network's advocacy activities illustrate the essential role that community radios can play in Swazi society, related to the national development framework.

"We now believe that this is a realizable dream. We may soon hear our own voices, and those of our neighbours, on air, within our communities, speaking in our native SiSwati and discussing solutions to our community's developmental problems," said Simon Ndlovu, a coordinator of Shiselweni community radio, whose station was granted a one-day licence for the first time by the communications regulator to broadcast a national event in April 2016.

Community radio empowers marginalised sectors of society such as youth, children, women,

poor and underprivileged people by giving them a voice. Their silence in the mainstream media is profound, where national issues, events and activities render them voiceless and do little to ensure their representation in society. Radio enhances the self-confidence of the community through the practice of articulating views, and discussing important local issues. Hearing their own voice on air, and that their neighbours' voices, speaking in the native language makes a huge impact.

For example, unlike content offered by newspapers and magazines, which requires literacy, "grassroots radio" encourages people from all walks of life including underprivileged groups to be part of the radio project, whether they are young or old, male or female, literate or illiterate, able or disabled. The youth, in particular, are attracted to community radio's training opportunities where they often work as volunteers.

New media form the basis for illustrating this. A 2014 UNESCO/Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) study on Swazi youth's social media habits confirms how much mobile technology has permeated local culture. Targeting 100 social media users aged 10-24; the study found that 69% preferred social media to mainstream media. It is worthy of note that youth constitute a significant portion of the Swazi population (43%), hence their issues should be featuring in the local newspapers, or on radio or television. In the absence of this platform, however, social media have given them an alternative one.

Local media also enhance participatory development, using creative ways of engaging people. Through drama workshops, listening clubs and role-plays, community radio rallies people together to tackle developmental problems. Community radio works effectively, whether tackling HIV and AIDS prevention, environmental damage or water and other service shortages. It improves problem-solving skills on issues ranging from culture, rural development, education, hygiene and sanitation, agriculture to local governance.

Continuous information exchange highlights issues important to the community to encourage its members to respond to changing circumstances and reduce social risks. For example,

slots for women's programs may be created to increase awareness and educate the public on matters affecting them directly, thus increasing their active participation and contribution to development. "In the long-term, community radio will directly contribute towards fighting the limited access to local relevant content and information that represents the needs and interests of Swazi communities," said Zwane.

Digital technologies offer access and choice

This prioritizing of issues important to the community applies to the new media, which offer a broad range of choices to users for accessing information and news. Through the internet, news sources have become so wide and diverse, for instance, from 15 minute broadcasts of local news to 24-hour news channels featuring international news. This wide range allows citizens to seek and find unbiased opinion of the news, unlike relying on a single source. The advent of citizen journalism and social media tools, such as blogs and Facebook, have also made it easy for citizens to create their own content, including posting their own views on global events or news.

Community radio is also an educational tool, contributing to awareness and knowledge creation that leads to improved livelihoods. For example, it creates market opportunities for local entrepreneurs and improves sales and incomes. Local radio brings opportunities for community members to learn new skills, thus improving prospects for employment at commercial stations. This is the case for campus radios, which provide ample opportunity for college and university journalism and broadcasting students to practice their craft in readiness for future employment.

Thus the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Swaziland is a campus radio licensing applicant, the only one within the network. "Our wish as journalism and mass communication students is to gain day-to-day, consistent practice on how to operate equipment, how to produce programmes and manage a radio station since we would run the campus radio station ourselves as volunteers," said Hlengiwe Dlamini – a third-year broadcast-

ing major within the Department.

Also, community radio is able to engage community members in demanding good governance and accountability. They can directly engage government officials in a bid to seek improvements in service delivery, while involving the broader listening audience in the discussion. Expert advice on issues important to poor communities can also be sourced, with follow-up discussions conducted on air and amongst the community at large. As a result, public policy can be influenced since politicians respond to informed voters who cover issues well even while exercising their right to scrutinize government action.

On the other hand, new media are perceived as an agent for social action. In Swaziland, the youth have bypassed mainstream media, most of which is state-owned and likely to be heavily censored, to focus on social media sites such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Mixit. "The young people have welcomed the emergence of social media because, among others, it affords them an opportunity not only to interact, but also enjoy the fundamental right to freedom of expression provided in Section 24 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Swaziland adopted in 2005," reflects the UNESCO/MISA report.

For example, Facebook became a popular platform for pro-democracy groups to mobilize themselves towards the failed 12 April 2011 uprising on the 1973 Decree, which banned political parties in the country. Again, MISA (2012) highlights how a teachers' strike in 2012 relied on social media to mobilise members to engage in a three-month long action.

Challenges and limitations

Community radio's key challenge in the Swazi context is the lack of demand for its existence or use of its services by members of the public. There is a perceived acceptance of the status quo by locals regarding the existing players in the broadcasting sector, and the mainstream media, in general. This creates a situation whereby community radio advocacy seems to be driven by the community radio network representatives and their civil society partners, but not the grassroots

people themselves who stand to benefit from the exercise of their right to freedom of expression. Therefore, there remains a need for strengthened and more widespread advocacy to enable Swazis to fully realize the benefits it offers at community level.

On the other hand, digital media tools are expensive in the country. Although computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones enable citizens to access media content in isolated areas where national radio, television and newspapers fail to reach, they are ill-afforded by Swazis, as is Internet usage, whose costs remain high. Costs notwithstanding, challenges arise when trying to access electricity in some parts of the country. For example, although 80% of Swazis subscribe to the mobile service offered by MTN Swaziland, the majority of its users can only afford its basic services, such as airtime for calling or sending messages. For many residing in poor, rural communities where electricity coverage is low, staying connected is a challenge due to limited access to battery recharging facilities.

Another challenge arises from the lack of funding and technical support which affects community radio, in particular. Expert advice on maintaining a fine balance between donor funding, subscriptions from community members and income generation projects, to ensure financial sustainability has been tried and tested in various community media contexts, including southern Africa. However, this often proves difficult to do while ensuring the independence of the station.

In Swaziland, where the economy is in decline and there is a limited number of companies offering corporate social responsibility, the pool of funding accessed by community radio initiatives becomes marginal at best. As a result, its initiatives so far are mainly funded by foreign or international organisations. While this funding forms the lifeblood of the sector's activities currently, it fosters a perception by Swazi authorities that the demand for community radio in the country is a foreign concept and, therefore, imposed.

Lastly, a major challenge is the non-legitimizing of community radios by local authorities. This is often attributed to concerns about in-

creased freedom of expression which may threaten government authority, especially in a context where there are significant restrictions on access to information. To remain active and relevant within the media space, Swazi radio initiatives currently apply for one-day licences to broadcast national events and pre-record programmes for subsequent distribution on CDs.

In conclusion, the passing of legislation that licenses community radios would be the first step towards enabling Swazis to realize the opportunities it offers and be able to realize some of their communication rights. Hence, the on-going advocacy by the sector, which involves engaging and influencing legislators, decision-makers and influential people to pass the Broadcasting Bill of 2013. This is a one-year European-Union funded project, while the latter is funded by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) and focuses on capacity building.

WACC support will ensure that Swazi community radios are adequately trained in ICT use, get access to basic computers, establish requisite management and administrative structures and formulate relevant policies in readiness to begin operating as soon as licenses are issued. ■

Swaziland Community Multimedia Network is a WACC project partner.