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Digital platforms and revenue generation strategies adopted by Zimbabwean mainstream news publishers

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Abstract

The advent of digital platforms has been associated with the unprecedented disruption of traditional news business models and doomsday prophecies signalling the death of mainstream news publishers. Based on interviews with journalists, marketing personnel, media managers, and media proprietors in Zimbabwe, this article examines the revenue generation and monetisation strategies adopted by mainstream news publishers in the age of platformisation of news production and distribution. It also explores the challenges news publishers face in an economy characterised by hyperinflation, low purchasing power, and stiff competition for advertising revenue. Results show that digital platforms such as X, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram have become indispensable to news publishers' routines of producing and distributing news to audiences. Yet, these media organisations struggle to develop sustainable business models to monetise their news work on these platforms. Data also revealed that most social media platforms do not offer meaningful revenue-sharing partnerships to news publishers, exacerbating these organisations' economic vulnerabilities. It was found that for broadcasters, YouTube offers modest revenue-sharing opportunities, which are insufficient to sustain their daily operations. The findings conclude that in Zimbabwe, digital platforms have no meaningful revenue-sharing partnerships with news organisations. As a result, mainstream news publishers are forced to rely on traditional revenue streams like advertising, subscriptions, paywalls, and licensing fees. But in a struggling economy, these sources are unstable, inconsistent, and highly unpredictable, resulting in an unhealthy media industry in the country.

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Introduction

The rise of digital platforms has brought remarkable changes to global media industries. (Santos and Mare, 2021). The changes are in the way news is sourced, packaged, circulated, and consumed (Santos and Mare, 2021). In Chua's (2023) words, digital platforms are "technological infrastructures that have digital materiality, and how publishers organise their innovations have become entangled with the digital materiality of platforms" (p.1857). This inevitable entanglement means journalism can no longer exist without relying on digital platforms for their day-to-day operational routines, audience engagement, and revenue generation. Like everywhere globally, Zimbabwean media organisations have been forced to adapt to new ways of news work and content monetisation (Mabweazara and Mare, 2021; Munoriyarwa and Chibuwe, 2022; Santos and Mare, 2021). Prospects of content monetisation in the platformed news ecosystem is an area that has not received much attention from media scholars in the global South. This is because most countries in the global south are what De Gregorio and Stremlau (2023) call "the smaller markets at the periphery" (p. 871) of the platform economy that are just starting to receive attention from scholarship. Given the talk around collapsing news business models and media sustainability headwinds buffeting the sector globally, this issue is vital. In Zimbabwe, this issue takes on a more prominent policy and practical relevance because of the ongoing socio-political and economic challenges that the country has been facing since the early 2000s (Mlambo, 2006).

The current study advances our understanding of digital platforms and news publishers' revenue generation models in the global South in a variety of ways. First, the relationship between digital platforms and news publishers in marginal markets like Zimbabwe has received scant attention when compared to what De Gregorio and Stremlau (2023) describe as "priority markets" (p. 871). Focus has tended to research on '*philanthrocapitalism'*, whereby big tech organisations are funding media organisations through initiatives like Google News Initiative, and Meta Journalism Project (Munoriyarwa et al., 2024). Secondly, little has been done to shed light on the actual existing revenue generation strategies adopted by news publishers in the African context. There is an urgent need to understand how news publishers in struggling African economies like Zimbabwe negotiate their viability and sustainability concerns within the context of the increasing "platformisation of cultural production" (Nieborg and Poell, 2018: p. 4276). This is even more pertinent if we consider that collective bargaining for higher revenue from platforms by news publishers in Canada and Australia has only yielded mixed results (Flew et al., 2023). This highlights the need to understand systems in Zimbabwe, where such collective bargaining has not yet occurred. Thirdly, unlike in priority markets in the Global North, where some news publishers have managed to cut deals with digital platforms, in the Global South, the situation remains dire. Besides Facebook's instant news articles, Google's AdSense and YouTube's revenue-sharing model, there are very few examples of well-documented attempts to build the monetisation capacity for African news publishers.

Finally, as noted earlier, no systematic studies exist on revenue-sharing models between digital platforms and news publishers in marginal markets. This is despite the fact that most newsrooms in these contexts operate on shoestring budgets, rely heavily on advertising, and often lack the audience numbers needed to benefit from live streaming and other platform-based revenue opportunities. Furthermore, most African newsrooms lack the collective bargaining power to negotiate meaningful financial deals with digital platforms. They also lack the digital literacy to understand the back-end operations of digital platforms such as algorithmic literacy, application programming interfaces (APIs), machine learning technologies, and artificial intelligence models. In most cases, newsrooms operating in marginal markets are at the mercy of digital platforms insofar as the upranking and downranking of their content on social media platforms is concerned. Based on interviews with 22 media professionals, this article examines the intersections of digital platforms, revenue generation, and news publishing in Zimbabwe. It contributes immensely towards a deeper understanding of the complexities of digital transformation in the Global South. The study also sheds light on the adaptive strategies used by news publishers in response to the evolving media landscape. It highlights the tensions between the media industry's profit motive, the push for innovation and staying current, and the enduring need to support democratic public spheres. This study (1) develops a better understanding of how the advent of digital platforms has adversely affected the revenue generation of news publishers in the Zimbabwean context, while (2) mapping and documenting emerging revenue-sharing models in operation between digital platforms and news publishers and (3) articulating how Zimbabwean news publishers are circumventing the financial precarity and cut-throat competition occasioned by the entry of digital platforms into the digital news making ecosystem. Whereas extant research on the relationship between news publishers and digital platforms has characterised the relationship as that of "frenemies" (Charalambous, 2021a: p. 1), this study goes a step further, moving beyond anecdotal claims to examine how these two key actors in contemporary public spheres are collaborating, co-existing and circumventing each other in their quest to remain afloat in a hyper-competitive environment.

Literature review

News publishers and digital platforms: A frenemies relationship?

Providing news and information is an important process in any nation, and it is widely regarded as a key yardstick for measuring democratic societies worldwide. News publishers play a pivotal role in shaping democratic systems since they provide platforms for disseminating information and facilitating civic engagement (Fischer and Jarren, 2024). With the coming of digital platforms, the role of news publishers has undergone some transformations in the way news is produced, disseminated, and consumed (Connolly, 2023). A new relationship between news media publishers and digital platforms now exists, which is characterised by unequal bargaining power between the partners (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).While news publishers rely on platforms like X, Google, Facebook, and YouTube to host content, drive traffic, and monetise audiences through targeted digital advertising (Poell et al., 2022), they earn relatively little. This is mainly because platform algorithms and policies heavily influence their revenue streams. Publishers also have limited control over how their content is displayed and monetised on these platforms.

Digital platforms have become essential partners for news publishers, as audiences worldwide increasingly prefer to access news through these channels (Anderson, 2024). As a result, publishers are often forced into unfair partnerships where platforms impose terms without consultation or negotiation. This unfair pairing of partners has led lawyers worldwide to scrutinise laws governing the relationship between content creators and platforms (Knapstad, 2021). Digital platforms wield this much power because they control algorithm changes, which often have unexpected and significant impacts on website traffic, making planning and financial decision-making challenging for publishers (Chua, 2023). Additionally, publishers argue that platforms “free ride” on their content, generating advertising revenue and collecting valuable user data without fairly compensating the content creators (Knapstad, 2021). Although platform monetisation tools such as YouTube’s Partner Program offer a share of advertising revenue, publishers have often pointed out that the revenue is tiny and thus meaningless compared to their efforts to produce news content.

Therefore, news publishers in the Global North have adopted various ways to adapt and negotiate the absolute power wielded by platforms. To adapt, publishers have developed strategies like search engine optimisation and paid search advertising to increase their online visibility (Elsayed et al., 2024). This involves identifying relevant keywords and phrases that audiences might use to search for content and then incorporating them into article titles, headings, and body content to make it more search-engine friendly. Meta tags and descriptions can also be added to provide search engines with a content summary. This builds high-quality backlinks from other reputable websites to increase the publisher’s website authority (Elsayed et al., 2024). Regularly updating content also helps search engines crawl and index the site, improving visibility. Similarly, paid search advertising targets specific keywords and phrases, creating compelling ad copy on search engine results pages. Giomelakis (2023) calls this “Semantic Search Engine Optimisation” (SSEO) and argues that it can help news media organisations improve their online visibility and rankings in organic search results. This can improve journalism by creating more valuable and comprehensive content that makes news content more discoverable.

News publishers in the global north have also innovated ways of strategically navigating the pitfalls of digital platforms through platform configuration (Chua and Westlund, 2022). This strategy reduces platform dependence through multi-directionality, specificity, and commitment to counterbalancing. Another strategy adopted is building subscription-based models to increase revenue whilst driving traffic to websites to monetise audiences through targeted advertising (Kanuri and Pattabhiramaiah, 2022). However, despite all these strategies, it is clear that digital platforms have created a vulnerable position for news publishers, hence the need for a more equitable and transparent relationship between publishers and platforms. (Knapstad, 2021). Examining the unequal relationship between news media publishers and digital platforms is important because it has far-reaching consequences for the quality of public interest journalism in any society. Without fair compensation, publishers earn less, making it harder to fund quality journalism, including impactful investigative work, in-depth analysis, and inclusive coverage (Vara-Miguel et al., 2021).

A troubling consequence of dwindling revenues is the homogenisation of news content, as publishers prioritise clickbait or sensationalism over nuanced reporting to attract broader audiences and remain visible on digital platforms (Flew et al., 2023). This can eventually lead to the closure of smaller news organisations that struggle to compete. The dominance of platforms can also compromise the editorial power of news organisations, which will feel compelled to align with the policies and algorithms of digital platforms to avoid being relegated to obscurity. This means that digital platforms are slowly taking away the autonomy and independence essential for quality journalism in news publishers, resulting in editors partially ceding their gatekeeping authority to platforms (Walters, 2022). This partial ceding of gatekeeping authority can increase the risk of spreading disinformation and misinformation, as sensational or provocative content is prioritised over fact-based reporting. Disinformation and misinformation are especially dangerous in African settings where newsrooms are resource-constrained and most rural and urban poor people have no mechanisms for fact-checking, resulting in them being manipulated during election times (Mare et al., 2019; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019). Additionally, financially struggling media organisations may cut back on local reporting in favour of national or international coverage to reach broader audiences. Due to smaller population metrics, local news often fails to generate enough clicks to attract advertisers or qualify for revenue-sharing on platforms. This can result in a lack of coverage of local issues, holding local authorities accountable, and telling stories of marginalised communities, which will be a failure by news publishers to play their watchdog role in modern democracies (Charalambous, 2021b; Park et al., 2024; Sjuchro et al., 2023). In the long run, the unequal relationship between news media publishers and digital platforms threatens the fabric of quality public interest journalism, weakening its ability to challenge political elites and facilitate diverse public discussions.

Conceptual framework

In Zimbabwe, the news media landscape has traditionally relied on advertising and sales for revenue, with the public broadcaster, ZBC, sometimes receiving government support and generating income through licensing fees. However, considering the profound impact of digital platforms on news media revenue streams in the Global North, it is essential to investigate how digital platforms have influenced revenue streams in Zimbabwe. This study, therefore, adopts the lens of monetisation to explore how Zimbabwean news publishers negotiate their marginal status in the changing platform economy. It explores the implications of digital platforms for news media revenue streams in Zimbabwe, particularly in the context of an already vulnerable news media sector, blighted by years of strained survival due to economic pressure and rising state repression, especially after the fall of Mugabe in 2017 (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2024). Monetisation refers to the multifaceted process of producing, distributing, and monetising content on digital platforms (Goanta and Bertaglia, 2023). Using monetisation as a conceptual framework allows researchers to analyse the intricate relationships between publishers, platforms, and revenue generation (Rußell et al., 2020). At its core, monetisation encompasses content creation, digital platform utilisation, and revenue streams. Content creators produce content around their interests, hobbies, experiences and in the case of news publishers, news, because it is their mandate, distributing it on digital platforms that thrive on user engagement and content sharing (Kanuri and Pattabhiramaiah, 2022). Effective monetisation requires exploring diverse revenue streams, including targeted advertisements, sponsored posts, influencer partnerships, affiliate marketing, programmatic advertising, subscription models, sponsored content, and native advertising.

Content creators can monetise on digital platforms in various ways. One is commerce media, a pivotal strategy integrating advertising, e-commerce, and media to create personalised ad experiences (Golmgrein, 2023). Affiliate marketing, programmatic advertising, and subscription models also offer lucrative revenue streams. Moreover, sponsored and native advertising seamlessly integrate ads into content, enhancing user experiences and revenue potential (Golmgrein, 2023). The selection of ad monetisation solutions is critical, with platforms like Google AdSense and Adsolutely offering distinct benefits. Google AdSense, widely used among beginner publishers, provides extensive reach and simplicity. Successful monetisation necessitates a strategic approach, involving a comprehensive understanding of monetisation basics, identifying suitable content for monetisation, leveraging commerce media platforms, and embracing commerce media (Golmgrein, 2023). By applying the monetisation framework, this study aims to provide nuanced insights into the complex revenue generation processes for news publishers in Zimbabwe, highlighting the importance of strategic monetisation approaches in the digital landscape.

In that context, this article seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are news publishers in Zimbabwe surviving the platformisation of news production and the ongoing economic challenges?

RQ2: What revenue-sharing models exist between digital platforms and news publishers?

RQ3: How are Zimbabwean news publishers circumventing the absence of solid revenue-sharing partnerships with digital platforms?

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach to explore digital platforms' impact on news publishers' revenue streams in Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling was used to select participants with in-depth knowledge and experience in marketing, media management, and ownership of news media organisations at Zimpapers, Alpha Media Holdings, Zimbabwe

Broadcasting Corporation, Associated Newspapers and NRTV. These organisations were chosen because they represent Zimbabwe's mainstream and upstart media organisations, from state-controlled to private media organisations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 respondents to gather rich and contextual insights into their experiences. 14 male and 8 female journalists were interviewed as the researchers sought a careful balance between male and female respondents, considering that the Zimbabwean media industry is male-dominated. Each interviewee was interviewed for at least 30 minutes. The sample size was determined by data saturation, with no predetermined ceiling, to ensure comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon. The interviews focused on the impact of digital platforms on traditional revenue streams, such as sales and advertising, and the exploration of new revenue streams through digital platforms like X, Google, Meta, YouTube, and TikTok. The interviews were chosen because, by their nature, they offered researchers the ability to delve into their daily subjective experiences (Knott et al., 2022), and in this case, the strategies and models employed by news media publishers in Zimbabwe to survive and thrive in the digital era. Before the interviews, the interviewees consented to participate in the research, whilst the researchers ensured that the identities of the interviewees were protected. Thematic analysis was deployed to identify patterns and themes in the data, which were then narratively presented to provide a detailed understanding of the impact of digital platforms on revenue streams for news publishers in Zimbabwe.

Findings

This section presents the study's findings in response to these questions: How are news publishers in Zimbabwe surviving the platformisation of news production and the ongoing economic challenges? What kind of revenue-sharing models exist between digital platforms and news publishers? How are Zimbabwean news publishers circumventing the absence of solid revenue-sharing partnerships with digital platforms?

Integration of digital platforms into the news publishing ecosystem

In responding to how news publishers in Zimbabwe are surviving the platformisation of news production and the ongoing economic challenges, findings point to a widespread embrace of digital platforms. Rather than resisting these shifts, publishers appear to have adopted a pragmatic, 'if you cannot beat them, join them' approach, as a means of survival. Thus, publishers increasingly rely on X, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube as key tools in their news work. This echoes earlier studies that explored how newsrooms have appropriated platforms in their daily routines (Mabweazara and Mare, 2021; Ncube et al., 2023; Ndhlovu and Jonhera, 2023). News publishers are packaging their content in various formats, including text, images, and videos, to cater to diverse audience preferences and platform rules and configurations. Broadcasters use platforms to share content beyond news, including interviews with studio guests, road shows and entertainment programs. Platforms are also used to stream entire programs online, such as news bulletins and current affairs shows. Print media outlets have also adapted by distributing news in PDF format via email and digital platforms. Notably, ZBC has developed a dedicated application for streaming news content, while all its radio stations are accessible online through streaming links. Zimbabwean news publishers are thus enjoying the convenience and speed of platforms in doing their news work, just like their counterparts across the globe. The findings show a high level of engagement between news organisations and their audiences on platforms, with listeners and readers providing feedback on programs and news content via WhatsApp and other channels. The findings, thus, highlight the significance of digital platforms in the Zimbabwean news media landscape, with news publishers increasingly relying on digital platforms to reach their audience. To buttress these insights, one male senior journalist from Alpha Media Holdings said these words:

> We post story links from newspapers such as NewsDay, the Standard, and the Zimbabwe Independent on our websites, Facebook, and X accounts. We also offer EMobi news, through which clients get digital news through mobile phones. We distribute the e-paper in PDF format to registered subscribers. By Zimbabwean standards, we are doing our best to stay ahead of the curve (Alpha Media Senior Journalist, 29 July 2024).

This narrative reinforces that news publishers in Zimbabwe have adopted platforms and seen a strategic shift towards digital convergence in their newsrooms. By appropriating digital platforms in their daily routines, newspaper companies in Zimbabwe are adapting new ways of doing things and diversifying their content delivery channels, presumably to widen their revenue streams. PDF-format e-papers and mobile news services like EMobi indicate this desperate effort to increase revenue streams in an economically constricted environment.

In the broadcast sector, a senior digital manager from the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation noted that:

> Yes, on X, Facebook, and YouTube, we have a handle @zbcnewsonline. We stream the whole bulletin on the main news, lunchtime and headlines on our Zim 24 app channel. Our news is packaged as short articles, video content and infographics (Senior Digital Manager, ZBC, 14 August 2024)

Here, the packaging of news into short articles, video content, and infographics suggests a deliberate attempt to present engaging news that attracts more hits on platforms. This approach aims to increase revenue while catering to diverse audience preferences and news reading styles (Nyarko, 2023). By embracing digital multimedia storytelling, the ZBC aims to keep up with the evolving media landscape. It seeks to position itself as a modern public broadcaster reaching all corners of Zimbabwe. However, a lack of funding and political constraints continue to limit this ambition.

At Zimpapers, an editor at the *Sunday News* noted that their organisation has a solid policy guiding digital platforms, but one that goes through much gatekeeping. The editor said these words:

> Yes, Sunday News has a social media policy guided by the parent company Zimpapers. The policy states that the publication must have its handles: X, Facebook, and YouTube. All the workers must follow the handles and retweet or share the stories in the paper. The paper has an online desk for publication, and two people are responsible for posting on the handles. However, they only post material approved by the paper's editor. Only when covering live events do the people in charge of online desks sometimes post directly because they will follow real live events that might take time to moderate through the usual channels (Editor, Sunday News, 16 September 2024|).

This narrative establishes that at Zimpapers, a solid digital platform policy guides and regulates all newsroom staffers in their daily routines. The narrative also underlines the importance of digital platforms in sourcing and distributing news. The fact that all newsroom staffers are expected to help official social media pages by following and sharing them to get maximum visibility is also interesting and remarkable. This may be linked to the need to have as much traffic as possible on the pages to attract more advertising clients.

Revenue sharing strategies

In responding to the question of what revenue-sharing models exist between digital platforms and news publishers, findings show that revenue from such partnerships remains modest. As for how Zimbabwean publishers circumvent the absence of solid revenue-sharing agreements, they have become more aggressive in pursuing traditional methods of revenue generation. Unlike in the Global North, where news organisations experiment with subscription models, events, content syndication, brand partnerships, data and analytics, crowdfunding, e-commerce, and sponsored events, findings show that Zimbabwean publishers face significant challenges in monetising news and related content on digital platforms. Despite some noticeable availability of faithful traffic in online audiences, revenue generation remains a significant hurdle for news publishers in Zimbabwe. Advertising remains the primary source of income for many publishers, with AMH noting that its revenue is tied to attracting more traffic to its content posted on platforms, attracting more advertisers. The little revenue is also further affected by the proliferation of unregistered online sites that pose stiff competition by stealing content and violating copyrights, whilst also diverting traffic from the original owners of the content. Findings from AMH thus called for policy measures to protect registered media organisations from such parasitic online sites so that monetisation through advertising can be improved. Monetising news in this context is essential for the sustainability and growth of broadcast, print and digital journalism in Africa. However, anecdotal research suggests that consumers' acceptance of paid content is still relatively low compared to other parts of the world. Older media consumers who generally have disposable income still prefer linear content, while younger ones often prefer digital, non-linear offerings.

Findings from the broadcasting sector revealed that ZBC generates part of its revenue through partnerships, including shared advertising revenue from YouTube, which is the only platform offering this initiative to the broadcaster. However, the earnings are modest, with YouTube paying between 30 cents and $12 per 1000 views, depending on geolocation, subscriptions, likes, and shares. ZBC also earns revenue through selling advertising airtime and much of its substantial revenue through licensing fees. The findings thus shed light on the need for media organisations to have more revenue streams, and this can only become possible if other platforms that display their content decide to share advertising revenue. A marketing journalist at ZBC said these words:

> ZBC platforms are monetised because of traffic, but this money is not much. ZBC is surviving mainly on licensing and a few adverts on radio/ TV and digital platforms. YouTube determines how many ads you should show on your videos. More ads generally mean higher potential earnings, but too many can annoy viewers and hurt your watch time. Advertisers may pay different rates based on where your viewers are located. You can earn money through ads, channel memberships, merchandise, etc. The more ways you monetise, the higher your potential earnings. Generally, you can earn anywhere from 30c to $12 per 1000 views. However, this is just an estimate; your actual earnings could be higher or lower. Earnings will likely increase as your channel grows and you attract a larger audience. Sharing of revenue advertising is not working or making sense for the broadcast in the sense that it is the same purse that is used to pay salaries and other obligations and then fails to meet costs related to content and equipment purchasing given that the broadcaster is not receiving grants from fiscus (Marketing Journalist, ZBC, 23 August 2024).

This cited narrative shows that ZBC's experience with platform monetisation is not the best since platforms are not generating significant revenue. While this limited revenue stream is supplemented by licensing fees and a few advertisements on radio and TV, the overall well-being of ZBC is at stake, as some of the narratives with journalists at the corporation pointed to obsolete equipment and deplorable working conditions for staff. The relationship of ZBC with YouTube is interesting in that the amount of shared advertising revenue is determined by traffic, which means that it will be hard for Zimbabwean publishers to have lots of traffic since the population of Zimbabwe is only 16 million. This could be remedied only when publishers created compelling content to attract global audiences. Additionally, YouTube's advertising algorithm, which determines the number of ads shown on videos, presents an interesting dilemma that calls for a delicate balance, because while more ads can increase earnings, excessive advertising can become monotonous and dissuade traffic from coming to ZBC pages. ZBC's reliance on licensing fees is also not a guaranteed revenue stream in a country where citizens are struggling to survive and may not pay the fees, whilst some have felt that the law compelling citizens to pay these fees is unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court in Zimbabwe had to lay down a ruling compelling citizens to pay the fees after the law had been challenged in court. Therefore, the sustainability model of the public broadcaster is questionable because, unlike publishers in the Global North who complain about platforms free-riding their content in stable economies, ZBC faces the double yoke of the same platforms and a struggling economy under creeping authoritarianism.

In print media, a salesperson from Alpha Media Holdings added that:

> Young readers are now online, and these platforms have enabled our newspaper titles to cut across all borders to be accessed worldwide. We also monetise some articles under paywalls to be only accessed by those who pay first. Also, subscribers have shifted to our e-paper platform, where they receive PDF papers through email or WhatsApp. Most revenue comes through advertising and digital platforms, attracting more viewers, readers and advertisers to advertise on our titles. When an online story attracts more hits, revenue comes with it because more advertisers want to place their adverts on publications, which they already know to have a wider following and readership (Sales Journalist, Alpha Media Holdings, 16 July 2024).

Once again, this narrative highlights the struggles of a newspaper from a small country in the digital age. It must adopt digital platforms to stay relevant, yet it faces significant revenue challenges. Despite efforts to monetise content through e-paper platforms and paywalls for select articles, advertising revenue remains the primary source of income. Again, this is not sustainable because advertising depends on attracting a lot of traffic. This shows that, to ensure survival, the relationship between small newspapers and platforms must be reimagined, potentially through revenue-sharing models, content partnerships, platform-supported subscription models, advertising support, and digital literacy training (Nyarko, 2023). By rethinking this relationship, small newspapers can receive fair compensation for their content, boost their online presence, and ensure their survival in a global world (Nyarko, 2023). This would allow them to continue producing high-quality journalism, serving local communities, and maintaining a diverse media landscape. Without it, they risk struggling to stay afloat in a system that favours platforms over content creators.

A managing editor with *The Herald* digital services said these words:

> Zimpapers' revenue is generated on platforms like Facebook through advertising revenue, as these platforms have large user bases and are connected to a larger audience. This is also achieved through sponsored content, partnerships, and subscription models on platforms such as Zimpapers online and mobile news apps… Besides the standard social media platforms, the organisation is creating other applications to which its readers can subscribe. Audiences can also access news from its website without subscribing, as it is free of charge. The readership base is deteriorating every day, possibly because the audience is facing financial problems that prevent them from logging into subscription-based applications, or because the type of content may be driving them away. Additionally, the organisation often lags in publishing breaking news and other current events, which may cause customers to shift their focus elsewhere. Advertising and subscriptions are central revenue generators. The organisation should improve its content to increase its audience base and enhance the accessibility of news on common platforms, such as Facebook, which is cheaper and more convenient for most readers. Additionally, utilising WhatsApp, a channel that can be accessed easily, can help direct the audience to the website, which carries most of the advertisements. However, I do not know why our WhatsApp channel's maximum following

> count is only 300, which does not tally with the size and popularity of the paper (Journalist, The Herald Digital services, 16 September 2024).

This narrative from *The Herald* digital services also shows several key challenges facing Zimpapers in the digital era. Firstly, the dwindling readership base is a pressing concern, potentially attributed to financial constraints or unengaging content. The organisation's struggle to promptly publish breaking news and current events may also contribute to this decline. Notably, the WhatsApp channel's limited count of 300 followers is striking, considering the paper's alleged popularity alluded to by the respondent. This discrepancy may be linked to the perceived bias towards ZANU-PF propaganda, deterring opposition supporters, who are approximately 50% of Zimbabwe's population if recent voting trends are considered, from engaging with the paper's digital platforms. A balanced approach to monetising online content while maintaining reader engagement is essential. All these efforts may not be practical if the underlying issues of content quality, timeliness, and perceived bias are not addressed.

From Associated Newspapers, a senior journalist with the *Daily News* said these words:

> Compensation and partnerships vary widely; not all media organisations receive payment from these platforms. Platforms that compensate our media organisation include Google (Google AdSense), Facebook and X, although the money is not much. In terms of survival, our organisation generates revenue through subscription-based services and advertising. We display ads, native ads, and sponsored content, which generate revenue based on clicks, impressions, or engagement. We have digital subscriptions, memberships, or paywalls which provide direct reader support. Commissions are earned from promoting products or services; our brand partners with other media outlets to create branded content. We also host conferences and workshops that generate revenue. We license our content to other media outlets or platforms. However, we also need to improve our revenue by creating improvement opportunities by diversifying our revenue streams through reducing dependence on a single source, like advertising and maybe having more revenue from the content-sharing partnerships with platforms (Senior Journalist, Daily News, 17 September 2024).

This narrative by a senior journalist from *Daily News* shows the complexities of revenue generation for news publishers in Zimbabwe in the digital age. The journalist notes that the *Daily News* has partnerships with Google AdSense, Facebook, and X but only generates modest revenue from these partnerships. The *Daily News* has thus diversified its revenue streams, adopting a multifaceted approach to ensure sustainability. This includes using digital subscriptions, memberships, and paywalls to raise revenue. Like at Zimpapers, advertising remains a significant revenue source, with display ads, native ads, and sponsored content generating income based on clicks, impressions, or engagement. Additionally, the *Daily News* earns commissions through promotional activities and partners with other media outlets to create branded content, as shown in the narrative. Hosting conferences and workshops constitutes another revenue stream, while content licensing to other media outlets or platforms provides further financial support.

However, the journalist astutely recognises the need to reduce dependence on advertising, which seems to be the mainstay of the paper and explore alternative revenue streams, especially an increase in revenue from content-sharing partnerships.

Interviews at Zimpapers Television Network (ZTN), a subsidiary of Zimpapers, showed similar experiences. Interestingly, ZTN was established to fulfil the Group's vision of becoming a converged media house, integrating print, digital, and broadcast sectors. It broadcasts its content through online digital platforms and on DSTV, a popular Sub-Saharan African direct broadcast satellite service owned by MultiChoice, headquartered in South Africa. This strategic partnership allows ZTN to reach a broader audience, both locally and regionally, to offer content like news, sports, and entertainment shows. Similarly, interviews at NRTV, a Zimbabwean television station with an operational model like ZTN showed challenges of platform monetisation. Both stations are thus navigating the challenges and opportunities of Zimbabwe's media landscape, which has undergone significant changes since the government partially opened the radio and television markets to private actors in 2018. Despite embracing digital platforms as a pivotal component of their operational models, both organisations are yet to adopt sustainable revenue generation models on digital platforms. This finding is corroborated by the sentiments expressed by the manager at NRTV, who noted that:

> Shareholder Rusununguko/Nkululeko Holdings fund NRTV. Research has shown that broadcasting stations do not profit in the first five years, but the shareholders still cover operational costs. A marketing team works to bring in revenue by selling air space to advertisers. These include spot ads, infomercials, documentaries, sponsored shows, product placements, and live streams. At the moment, no NRTV pages are monetised. NRTV has utilised digital media platforms to gain traction with the audience and generate interest in its shows from amongst the viewers (Station Manager, NRTV, 12 October 2024).

This interview extract, which echoes narratives from ZTN, reveals a striking paradox in Zimbabwe's media landscape, wherein NRTV and ZTN struggle to develop sustainable digital revenue strategies despite investing in digital platforms. This is despite the Global North evidence showing that some news publishers have profitably managed to sustain their operations in the digital age. The disconnect shows a critical gap between the theoretical potential of digital media and the practical realities of Zimbabwe's media ecosystem. The absence of substantial partnerships between these Zimbabwean media outlets and digital platforms raises critical questions regarding the sustainability of their revenue models.

Discussion and analysis

This study's findings highlight the challenges news publishers face in marginal markets like Zimbabwe monetising their content on digital platforms. The major revelation of the study is that digital platforms have significantly impacted revenue streams for news publishers in Zimbabwe, just as they have done elsewhere. Modest compensation from digital platforms for a few certain publishers has forced news publishers to rely on selling advertising space. Digital platforms are merely used as conduits to attract more traffic that, in turn, brings more advertisers. This is an unsustainable model due to Zimbabwe's economic instability, which is increasingly attracting fewer advertisers (Tshabangu and Salawu, 2024b). Subscriptions and paywalls are also affected by this challenge, as Zimbabweans lack a reading culture. These findings echo those of Wadesango et al. (2023), who argue that social media has caused a massive loss in revenue and advertising for print media. Wadesango et al. (2023) use an accounting perspective to analyse the year-end financial statements of print news publishers in Zimbabwe to come to this conclusion. This shows a negative relationship between the financial performance of the print media sector and the rise of digital platforms in Zimbabwe. However, this current study expands this accounting perspective to show that multilayered processes contribute to this revenue loss. This shows that news publishers' revenue loss demands a multi-faceted analysis. Moreover, the reliance on programmatic revenue streams by news publishers renders them vulnerable to the stringent policies set by tech giants. This precarious relationship between publishers and tech giants exemplifies the challenges of monetisation in the digital age.

This shows that monetisation, both at the level of theory and practice, remains a complex matter for news publishers in Zimbabwe. These monetisation challenges for Zimbabwean news publishers undermine proper public interest journalism (Moyo et al., 2019), leading to accusations of sensationalism, partisanship, and chequebook journalism (Matsilele and Ruhanya, 2024; Ruhanya, 2016). For example, one can observe this by considering the implementation of subscription-based ePapers by Alpha Media Holdings (AMH) as a monetisation strategy on digital platforms. On one hand, these ePapers enable the media organisation to reduce production costs associated with newsprint and printing, while generating revenue through digital subscriptions. For example, narratives from respondents at AMH indicated that there has been a satisfying uptake of the ePaper, especially in younger generations. In comparison, the older generations still prefer printed newspapers. However, this satisfying uptake of the ePaper raises serious concerns about whether the organisation is still pursuing the public interest duty of informing the citizenry, since these ePapers, by their digital nature, are only available to a select few urbanites with smartphones. Similarly, those accessing the ePaper may share it with their colleagues to create a free rider problem, wherein readers rely on shared content from subscribed colleagues, at the expense of revenue to the organisation. Moreover, Zimbabwe's perennial problems of economic constraints and poverty prevent some readers from affording subscriptions, which means that public interest obligations further compromise the commercial imperatives of the AMH.

In contrast, publishers in priority markets have leveraged platform configuration strategies to navigate their digital presence. Yet respondents interviewed for this study seem to suggest that publishers in Zimbabwe have seemingly accepted their fate and have no wish to challenge or change it. This conceding of defeat by news publishers in Zimbabwe has severe implications for democracy, since it results in a weak public sphere (Matsilele and Ruhanya, 2024; Ruhanya and Gumbo, 2023), hence in the years gone by, Zimbabwe has been blighted by disputed elections and a lack of robust media oversight on how political elites are running public affairs. This is illustrated by Ruhanya and Gumbo

(2023),who argue that the undermining of media roles in Zimbabwe's economically turbulent environment, where bribes and inducements compromise journalism ethics, has given birth to a weak media that is in the pockets of ruling elites and corporate capitalism. This study extends Ruhanya and Gumbo's (2023) analysis by highlighting the impact of global trends, particularly the unfair advantage that digital platforms have over news publishers, and this shows that the healthy functioning of media organisations in Zimbabwe is not only structured by politics but by other forces as well. This holistic approach to analysing journalism practice is pertinent in this context because there is always a complex interplay of global and local factors shaping the media landscape in Zimbabwe. In supporting this approach of analysis, Nielsen and Fletcher (2023) highlight the importance of considering country-specific differences in platformisation, noting that historic strengths of newspaper markets can influence levels of news platformisation. This framework is particularly relevant in the Zimbabwean context, where localised challenges of the economy and politics play an equally forceful role in structuring journalism practice to match the impact of global platformisation trends.

Declining revenues in Zimbabwe have also resulted in underpaid and disgruntled journalists in the newsrooms. In extreme cases, declining revenues have resulted in small publishers closing shop, whilst retrenchment of journalists has also been witnessed in Zimbabwe. Chuma (2020) notes that Zimbabwean newsrooms retrenched their journalists, leading to a surplus of journalists in the job market that saw some journalists resorting to freelancing. This did not help their plight since freelancing is often frowned upon whilst freelancers have often been harassed by the state (Tshuma et al., 2024). The retrenchment of close to 200 journalists by Zimpapers and ZBC in 2013 exemplifies the severity of this issue (Chuma, 2020). This shows that economic hardships can compromise journalists' independence and autonomy, leading to sensationalism, partisanship, and chequebook journalism. Moreover, the harassment of freelancers undermines the diversity of voices and perspectives in the public sphere. On the other hand, the intersection of population metrics and content quality presents a significant dilemma for content publishers in Zimbabwe. With a relatively small population of approximately 16 million people, the country's online audience is limited, making it difficult for publishers to generate substantial revenue from digital platforms. The population of those who can effectively go online is also further decimated when one considers that more than 50% of Zimbabweans live in rural areas where network coverage, power availability and general poverty limit their ability to surf the internet (Kumba and Olanrewaju, 2023). Since higher revenues on platforms are tied to higher traffic, which is harder to achieve with such a small population in Zimbabwe, publishers in small countries like Zimbabwe are unlikely to be able to challenge their unfair relationships with platforms. One potential solution is for publishers to produce high-quality content that appeals to a global audience, thereby increasing traffic and revenue potential. However, this approach is more feasible for softer content types like entertainment, which can transcend geographical boundaries. On the other hand, news content is often only locally relevant and less appealing to a broader audience. The success of Nigerian creators in attracting global audiences with entertainment content (Endong, 2018), highlights the potential for Zimbabwean publishers to explore similar strategies. Nevertheless, the significant difference in population size between Nigeria (approximately 240 million) and Zimbabwe underscores the inherent disadvantage smaller countries face in achieving meaningful monetisation through traffic metrics alone. It is therefore essential to explore innovative revenue streams and support structures that can sustain local news publishers, ensuring the preservation of diverse voices and perspectives in the digital landscape (Nyarko, 2023).

The findings of the study highlight several key takeaways. One of these is the profound impact of digital platforms on news publishers in Zimbabwe, a central theme of the findings. Notably, digital platforms have significantly disrupted revenue streams, forcing news publishers to rely heavily on selling advertising space due to platforms' failure to share revenue. Moreover, subscriptions and paywalls have failed to provide a solution to the funding woes of news publishers because Zimbabweans are generally unwilling to pay for news. The precarious relationship between news publishers and digital platforms is not helping matters since publishers are vulnerable to stringent policies and algorithm changes foisted upon them. In chasing monetisation, publishers are thus undermining proper public interest journalism to chase traffic on their pages, leading to sensationalism and partisanship. These takeaways have significant implications for academia and the media industry in Zimbabwe. Remarkably, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of platformisation by highlighting the impact of global trends on local news publishers. The findings also emphasise the need for innovative revenue streams and the importance of high-quality content appealing to global audiences. The research findings also have the potential to inform policy decisions for policymakers, regulators, and other industry stakeholders.

A worrying fact observed from the findings is that news publishers in Zimbabwe adapt to content sharing on digital platforms as a reactive measure, rather than a proactive embracing of innovative technologies. This piecemeal adoption of digital platforms in Zimbabwe is worrying because it means that news publishers in the country will always be behind and slow to adopt new technology in their newswork routines. The slowness of news publishers to adopt new technology is attributed to various structural and economic challenges, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and a precarious economic environment, according to the findings. This means that Zimbabwe falls into the late majority category, behind the early adopters of technology, but also slightly ahead of laggards. News publishers in Zimbabwe, therefore, must accelerate their digital transformation efforts to remain relevant and competitive in the rapidly evolving global media landscape. News publishers must also try to negotiate with digital platforms as a block instead of approaching these big tech companies individually. Another recommendation from the study's findings is that news publishers in Zimbabwe should explore or intensify alternative revenue streams, such as sponsored content and e-commerce integrations. They may also develop niche content and train all newsroom staffers in digital infrastructures so that they interact with their audiences, intending to increase revenue. In this vein, future research building upon this current research may benefit from examining the role of digital infrastructure literacy in journalists in building revenue streams and the sustainability of local news publishers in Zimbabwe.

Conclusion

The study has examined the precarious financial predicament of news publishers in Zimbabwe, fueled by the failure of digital platforms to provide fair compensation for content published on them. The findings showed that news publishers in Zimbabwe profoundly depend on platforms such as X, Google, YouTube and Meta. The platforms, however, do not offer sustainable revenue-sharing partnerships, leading to economic vulnerabilities for news publishers. The traditional revenue streams of advertising, subscriptions, paywalls, and licensing fees are volatile and susceptible to the challenges of Zimbabwe's struggling economy. This means that in the Zimbabwean context, there is a need to understand how big tech algorithms operate and ensure that relevant and relatable content is produced, which can attract more traffic and engagement. This study has illuminated challenges news publishers face operating in "marginal markets" where big tech platforms are not keen to strike mutually beneficial deals with publishers. Because of their limited bargaining power, publishers in Zimbabwe have had to find creative ways to survive in an inequality-ridden platform economy. Unlike in developed nations where news publishers have better bargaining power because of their priority status in the advertising industry, those operating in the Global South bear the brunt of the tweaks to algorithms, down-ranking of news feeds and limited traffic to their content via websites. In recent months, countries like Kenya and South Africa have initiated media inquiries into the anti-competitive behaviours of big tech companies. These preliminary inquiries can shape the relationship between digital platforms and African news publishers. However, caution should be taken on board given that, unlike Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa, which are "priority markets" for big tech in Africa, Zimbabwe is considered a marginal market in the broader scheme. This means the crumbs from the table may not necessarily trickle down to Zimbabwean news publishers.

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Author contributions

Peter Chiridza Methodology Investigation Data curation Writing (original draft, review and editing) Visualization Admire Mare Conceptualization Visualization Supervision Project administration Funding acquisition.

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