

African Community Media, AI, and the Question of Community Participation in the Disruptive Era

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the nexus of Southern African community newspapers' sceptical AI integration and grassroots democracy. The sceptical approach to AI integration in marginalised media markets of Southern African community newspapers' news ecosystems is interrogated. We respond to the questions: In what ways is the integration of AI tools in everyday news production routines within Southern African community media institutions defined by scepticism? What is the basis of scepticism amongst Southern African community media journalists? What are the implications for grassroots democracy in these communities? The Southern African community media under study are drawn from South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively sampled journalists and editors from these newsrooms. Findings show that the sceptical approach to AI adoption among Southern African community newspapers is largely driven by fears and concerns about AI's documented mass production of misinformation and disinformation. In addition, the sceptical approach to AI adoption in these newsrooms is rooted in a lack of technical proficiency with AI tools and financial limitations occasioned by the decline in philanthropic funding.

Keywords

AI; AI scepticism; citizen participation; community media; grassroots democracy; journalism; Namibia; South Africa; Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

There is no unified agreement on the trajectory of AI, its ethics, deployment, and promises (Humble & Mozelius, 2022) or what AI envisions for our society or the future (Groumpos, 2023). Every facet of our well-being and society is still in shock and awe about the promises and threats of AI. Two extreme poles generally dominate the debates on AI. On the one hand, there are the techno-sceptics, who see society increasingly drifting into danger, harm, and eventual oblivion because of the valorisation and deterministic adoption of AI technologies (Munoriyarwa & Chiumbu, 2024). On the other hand, there are the techno-optimists who see AI as a saviour (Whittaker, 2019).

While these debates are raging, media and journalism researchers are grappling with how AI technologies, in their various forms, impact their field and how the field is likely to evolve in the future (Lim et al., 2023). Firstly, many low- and high-end AI technologies are already shaping journalism and media institutions. Depending on whom one listens to, these technologies are either improving journalism or further plunging it into an inescapable crisis. For instance, generative AI technologies have swept through journalism and news producers like a storm (Munoriyarwa & de-Lima-Santos, 2026). There is also a gamut of photo-editing AI technologies that have plunged photojournalism into a deep crisis (Ditlhokwa et al., 2025).

These developments are happening in a context where journalism and media institutions are struggling to survive. The traditional journalism model, which largely thrived on advertising revenue, has faltered (Pickard, 2021). Trust in the mainstream media has also declined sharply (Reese, 2021), and digital media spaces are eroding many traditional mainstream media audiences and revenue sources. As Reese (2021) notes, for mainstream media institutions, the wolves are at the gate and the centre cannot hold. In African media contexts, these challenges have a particularly devastating effect. As Nassanga (2009) notes, the situation is dire for African community journalism institutions. African media have long struggled to attract significant advertising revenue (Munoriyarwa et al., 2023) and large grants. They also have a limited audience base defined by geography or interest (Okon, 2017). This is because their advertising sources are relatively small compared to media operating in Europe and North America. They also receive very little state support (Chuma, 2008), and no sustainable donor funding in the long run (Moyo, 2021).

AI is filtering into media ecosystems at a time when community media, especially community newspapers, face sustainability pressures. Despite these challenges, community media are expected to sustain grassroots democracy by providing “spaces of articulation” for local communities. Consequently, community media institutions remain central to providing news to communities and ensuring subaltern participation in communication activities (Rau et al., 2008). From a democratic participant perspective, community media serve local communities and foster inclusive, active participation in the public sphere (Akpabio, 2024). They are in some instances anti-state but commercial enterprises. Regardless of their centrality in the media ecosystem, African media and communication researchers largely overlook them. Against this background, we examine the intricate relationship between Namibian, South African, and Zimbabwean community newspapers, AI scepticism, and community participation.

We respond to three main research questions (RQ):

RQ1: In what ways is the integration of AI tools in everyday news production routines within Southern African community media institutions defined by scepticism?

RQ2: What is the basis of this scepticism amongst Southern African community media journalists?

RQ3: What are the implications of the scepticism for grassroots democracy in these communities?

Scholarship interrogating the nexus of AI and journalism in African contexts is sparse. There is little to nothing on how community media institutions are responding to the wave of AI. We attempt to fill this gap by examining how community media institutions are coping with the AI wave. This article is organised as follows: In Section 2, we provide an overview of community newspaper contexts in Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. This is followed by a literature review examining the intersection of community newspapers and democracy. We then proceed to the conceptual framework, which is followed by the methodology, findings, discussion and conclusion.

2. Community Newspapers in South Africa, Namibia, and Zimbabwe

Community media often serve a specific geographic community or community of interest. Community newspapers in Namibia play a pivotal role in providing localised news and fostering community engagement, particularly in areas often overlooked by mainstream media. Main players in the Namibian community media sector include the *Windhoek Express*, *Caprivi Vision*, *Erongo*, *Namib Times*, and *The Zambezi Scoop*. These community newspapers cater for specific regions or communities. For instance, the *Caprivi Vision*, based in the Zambezi region, is one of the oldest community newspapers in the country, while *Erongo* primarily serves the coastal regions with local news and events coverage (Akpabio, 2024). *Windhoek Express* is a community newspaper featuring locally oriented news for Windhoek and the surrounding areas. The *Windhoek Express* publishes weekly on Thursdays, with a normal print run of 20,000, of which about 10,000 copies are inserted into *Republikein*, *Algemeine Zeitung*, and *Namibian Sun* and sold by street vendors in Windhoek and Rehoboth. The other 10,000 copies are distributed free at selected outlets (Akpabio, 2024). Content is offered in English and Afrikaans, with a segment of German. Most of these community newspapers face viability and sustainability challenges due to limited advertising revenue. We note that these community newspapers are “privately-owned,” and do not receive funding from the government, NGOs, or other external bodies. The private ownership of these institutions raises debates about the normative definition of community media.

In contrast, South Africa has a huge number of community newspapers. This is arguably because its rich linguistic diversity provides a space where community newspapers can thrive. The country has 12 official languages (including sign language), many of which are spoken by significant portions of the population. This means that linguistic diversity offers these community newspapers a ready audience to build a following. Secondly, community newspapers can access government funding through quasi-state institutions like the Media Development and Diversity Agency. Over the years, the post-apartheid government has provided funding through the Media Development and Diversity Agency to community media, ensuring equitable access to information for previously marginalised communities. The funding, while inadequate, has gone a

long way toward ensuring sustainability for community media. This explains why South Africa's community newspapers endure and survive longer than those of its neighbours. In addition, a large pool of graduates and student support through university work-integrated learning programmes has ensured community newspapers' access to subsidised labour, allowing them to cut labour costs. However, over the years, South African community newspapers have suffered as advertisers opted for digital media (see Metula, 2023), and state support has dwindled. This loss of income has negatively impacted their ability to invest in new technologies. Furthermore, they have lost their seasoned journalists, whose capital lay in their knowledge of local communities and issues. Lastly, their local "development discourse" (see Metula, 2023) has become less attractive to young audiences.

The community newspaper industry in Zimbabwe is dominated by the Community Newspaper Group, run by New Ziana, a government news agency (Chiumbu et al., 2009). The Community Newspaper Group was incubated in 1982 by the Zimbabwean government to fill information gaps in rural areas, since mainstream media are largely urban-centric. Each of the country's then eight (now 10) provinces had a dedicated newspaper set up. However, in the post-2000 period, most of these newspapers now exist in name due to liquidity challenges in an unstable economic environment. Liquidity challenges, company closures, unemployment, corruption, and inconsistent economic policies, among others, continue to haunt the country (Ncube, 2019). Community newspapers such as *Pungwe News* (Mutare), *Chaminuka News* (Marondera), and *Indosakusa* (Gwanda) have virtually faltered. However, *The Times*, domiciled in Gweru in the Midlands province, remains relatively vibrant. There are also a number of privately owned small-scale newspapers operating as community media, despite being sole proprietorships of individuals or companies. The ownership and control of these newspapers defy the conventional definition of community media.

3. Literature Review

Extant literature from the global North dominates research on the intersection of AI and news production routines and practices (Helberger et al., 2020; Radoli, 2024). Most of this literature emanates from the US, Europe, and China (Radoli, 2024). The key argument in the literature is that newsrooms across the globe are exploring how AI can improve information sourcing, organisation, and story distribution (Kothari & Cruikshank, 2022). Furthermore, there is consensus in the literature that Western countries, along with China, are leading innovation and application of AI systems (Kothari & Cruikshank, 2022; Yu & Huang, 2021), while Africa is lagging behind (Munoriyarwa et al., 2023).

Debates on AI adoption within the African journalism ecosystem also focus on socio-technological barriers (Munoriyarwa, 2024). In fact, Munoriyarwa (2024) reveals how the detrimental effects of limited access to AI tools place Southern African media organisations at a disadvantage on the global stage, thereby perpetuating socio-technological disparities between the Global North and Global South. Critically, Munoriyarwa (2024) calls for collaborative efforts among policymakers, industry leaders, and stakeholders to create an inclusive environment that maximises AI's potential for the greater benefit of Southern African societies. This study is indebted to preliminary examinations on how AI is impacting media organisations and journalism practice in Africa. However, while important progress has been made in this area, more scholarly attention is needed, as there is a dearth of literature focusing on community media and AI in (Southern) Africa.

Extant literature on African community media institutions in the digital age straddles across discourses, including the intersection of community media and citizen engagement (Chibuwe et al., 2026; Tsarwe & Sibanda, 2025). Questions about people's participation in community media discourse and sustainability issues resonate throughout the literature (Sibanda & Nkomo, 2025). For example, Nassanga (2009) examines the changing patterns of community media in East Africa in the digital age, noting that community media have transitioned into inclusive "imagined" communities. Tsarwe and Sibanda (2025) concur that digital social media platforms allow ordinary people to actively participate in community media news production ecosystems. In essence, Tsarwe and Sibanda (2025) argue that Zimbabwean community radio stations are integrating mobile phones and other social media applications, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, as well as bulk short message services, to interact more with their audiences. This perspective is also corroborated by Chibuwe et al. (2026), albeit the latter focus on community newspapers. Importantly, Chibuwe et al. (2026) assert that citizen involvement in community media news production ecosystems in Zimbabwe is not innocently meant to increase people's participation in digital public spheres but should be viewed as bait meant to attract donor funding (Chibuwe et al., 2026). The argument by Chibuwe et al. (2026) is plausible given the punishing economic environment in which Zimbabwean media institutions operate.

Preliminary literature on AI and community media in Southern Africa focuses on South Africa. For example, Makwambeni et al. (2023) make a cursory assessment of journalists' perceptions of AI deployment in the South African community media space. Focusing on community radio stations domiciled in Western Cape province, South Africa, Makwambeni et al. (2023) indicate that while most journalists perceive AI as enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of the news-making process, some perceive AI as inimical to the legitimacy and credibility of the profession. The study by Makwambeni et al. (2023) provides important beginnings in understanding AI integration in community media in Africa. However, due to their focus, Makwambeni et al. (2023) confine their analysis to community radio stations in South Africa. The literature on how community newspapers in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Namibia are responding to the AI wave is sparse. Building on this extant literature, this study interrogates the integration of AI into Southern African community newspapers and the "communityness" and democratic obligations of these institutions.

4. The Community Press as a Disrupted Field

We conceptualise both the community press and digital disruption to understand how AI has influenced participation in a digitally disrupted era. We reflect on issues of community participation, production, and distribution. This is because community media ought to be characterised by grassroots participation (in content production), and a focus on local community interests, needs, and problems (Nassanga, 2009; see also Tacchi, 2003). It champions local development, gives the subaltern a voice, and enables them to enact citizenship (Tacchi, 2003). Community media ideally empowers citizens. Consequently, it is crucial to interrogate how AI-induced disruptions enhance or alter the thrust of community media.

Previously, community media were defined by community of interest or geographical location or parameters (see Tacchi, 2003), but the advent of digital media and the wider participation they offer redefined the idea. In South Africa and Australia, for example, community radio was defined in terms of community of interest or geographical community (Tacchi, 2003). These definitions have been disrupted by the advent of digital media, which have widened communities beyond the local and national borders (Nassanga, 2009). As Alfandika and Muchetwa (2019, p. 44) note, "geographical proximity has long ceased to be...a necessary

condition for the existence of a community.” This is because “unlike initial community media where members in the locality participated directly, people now largely depend on low-cost technology by calling in and sending e-mail messages to local radio stations” (Nassanga, 2009, p. 42). This citizen participation has led some scholars to characterise community media as citizens’ media (Rodriguez, 2001, as cited in Atton, 2007; see also Tacchi, 2003). This is because community media is characterised by accessibility (Nassanga, 2009; Tacchi, 2003). Given these digital media disruptions of the very structure and definition of community and community media, it is crucial to interrogate the nexus of AI and African community media.

Disruption refers to significant changes that alter or displace established industries and practices within the field (Christensen et al., 2015). But digital disruption refers to rapid advancements and/or changes in digital technologies that upset traditional ways of doing things (Christensen et al., 2015). We draw on Christensen’s digital disruption framework, initially developed for commercial innovation, to understand how AI integration has disrupted community media in Southern Africa, positively or negatively. Digital disruption is augmented by Bourdieu’s (1984) field theory. Community media constitutes a field. Power is central to Bourdieu’s relational analysis of behavioural outcomes and processes of transformation across different fields (see Hilgers & Mangez, 2014; Winzler, 2014). Bourdieu (1984) posits that individuals’ power is determined by the quantity and configuration of their resources, as well as the value assigned to these resources within a specific field. Consequently, it is arguable that editors’ and journalists’ perceptions of how AI could enhance or undermine their power could influence how community media integrates or responds to AI. This is plausible, given that technological factors shape how journalists perceive their journalistic practices (Russell, 2007). It is part of those factors Dickson (2008) characterises as external shocks that influence how journalism is practised. It is thus crucial to examine AI as an external shock to community media, the shocks it induced, and how community media responded. Lastly, it is important to study AI integration, given that newspapers, in particular, were already dealing with the external shock of digitisation when AI appeared on the scene; a shock they adapted to by shifting from an advertiser-first model to a reader-first model (see Bakke & Barland, 2022).

5. Methodology

This study is qualitative, specifically interpretive in approach. We draw upon in-depth interviews with 17 key informants, including community newspaper editors and journalists from Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. These were interviewed because they possessed unique and important knowledge (see Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) about AI adoption and scepticism in the adoption of AI in community newspapers’ news production routines in the selected countries. Lastly, we wanted to understand how current AI adoption trends and practices affect grassroots democracy in these communities.

The research participants and their organisations were anonymised, as some, not all, requested anonymity for their names and organisations. However, some participants from South African community newspapers had no problem with their workplaces being identified. The same is true for some participants from Zimbabwe’s “privately-owned” community newspapers. Regardless, for consistency’s sake, all participants were anonymised by assigning pseudonyms to protect their identities. We purposively sampled these community newspaper journalists based on their knowledge and experience as community newspaper journalists/editors. Purposive sampling entails selecting groups or categories to study based on their relevance to the RQs and, most importantly, the explanation or account being developed (Yin, 2015).

Purposive sampling was preferred to ensure the selection of information-rich cases. Across the three contexts, the majority of our interviewees had worked as reporters for at least four years.

From Namibia, we interviewed four community newspaper journalists drawn from four privately owned community newspapers. Three of the four publications have circulation exceeding 10,000 per week, but none of them receives government, NGO, or other external funding. Importantly, these newspapers are all urban- and semi-urban-based. The newspapers are based in: Windhoek, Namibia's capital, in the Erongo region (at the coast in Swakopmund); and the Zambezi region (extreme north-eastern Namibia).

In South Africa, we interviewed eight community newspaper journalists. Most of the journalists are based in the Eastern Cape Province and work for a mixture of urban and rural newspapers, which had modest circulation figures ranging from 10,000 to 15,000 copies. These community newspapers receive grants from the Media Development and Diversity Agency. In Zimbabwe, we interviewed five community newspaper journalists. Interviewees were drawn from both the privately owned (three) and government-owned community newspapers (two) within the Community Newspaper Group. The privately owned community newspapers from which we selected participants are located in Gweru, Kwekwe, and Masvingo respectively. We do not reveal the regions in which the state-owned community newspapers from which respondents were selected because doing so would inadvertently reveal the organisations and the respondents. It is difficult to ascertain community newspaper circulation figures in Zimbabwe because there are no officially audited circulation figures. Table 1 shows the codes used to identify the research participants.

Table 1. Summary of interview participants by country, role, and experience.

Code	Country	Role (in community newspaper)	Years of experience
NM1	Namibia	Editor	5
NM2	Namibia	Editor	11
NM3	Namibia	Journalist	5
NM4	Namibia	Journalist	7
ZJ1	Zimbabwe	Journalist	4
ZJ2	Zimbabwe	Journalist	9
ZJ3	Zimbabwe	Journalist	5
ZJ4	Zimbabwe	Editor	21
ZJ5	Zimbabwe	Editor	23
SA1	South Africa	Journalist	9
SA2	South Africa	Editor	17
SA3	South Africa	Journalist	6
SA4	South Africa	Editor	16
SA5	South Africa	Journalist	5
SA6	South Africa	Journalist	5
SA7	South Africa	Journalist	10
SA8	South Africa	Journalist	7

The research encountered several logistical challenges. Notably, seven targeted journalists and editors were not interviewed because some declined interview requests due to scheduling conflicts, whilst others were unresponsive. We purposefully sought participants with direct experience implementing AI in community newspaper environments. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, which identifies patterns within and across the data related to participants' lived experiences, views, perspectives, behaviours, and practices (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

6. Findings

Section 6.1 describes the uptake of AI in community media. It is followed by three other sections: the basis of scepticism, AI-induced external shocks, and, lastly, the implications for community participation.

6.1. *Integration of AI Tools in Everyday News Production Routines*

Most journalists from the three countries note that their slow integration of AI is due to a lack of knowledge about available AI technologies. Consequently, they have restricted their use of AI technologies to the most basic AI tools available on the web that do not require a subscription or have little to no purchase cost (NM2). The respondents from Zimbabwe underscored that they use basic AI tools provided by big techs such as NewsWhip, which “offers a basic AI tool that allows you to monitor incoming news before they trend” (ZJ1). This is an AI application that also analyses social media platforms to spot real-time trends and incoming news before they go viral, thus allowing journalists to craft their stories. But one journalist pointed out that:

These tools are easily accessible, but the problem is they do not often point us to what we consider as our local community news...they point us to national news which might not really sync with our mandate as community newspapers. (SA1)

Some of the community newspaper journalists further noted that accessible AI tools like translation tools have replaced manual typing. These include speech-to-text and natural language and processing tools. One journalist noted that:

As a journalist, you can access Otter.ai and Trint applications that also help translate and transcribe audio and video interviews into texts. But there are also advanced versions of these AI applications that you can only access by subscription....But you will notice that some of the applications appear in different versions because there are many AI companies producing them...for example, Whisper is an OpenAI open-source speech recognition software that is also available to us. (SA2)

It is clear from the evidence that there is no structured approach to adoption of AI within community newspapers. Each newspaper, and each journalist, access what is available to them. However, access is at a very basic level. For instance, they access very basic AI applications like AI tools for summarisation, transcription, and drafting of limited news content. The reliance on basic freely accessible AI tools betrays a lack of resources or financial muscle to purchase and adopt the high-end, paid-for professional AI tools.

6.2. The Basis of Scepticism Amongst Journalists

The data not only reveals a slow integration of AI, but it also reveals scepticism. The integration of AI in Namibia and South Africa could be expected to be significantly more advanced than in Zimbabwe. This anticipation stems from South Africa's position as a leader in Africa's digital economy, bolstered by its robust digital infrastructure, dynamic start-up ecosystem, and a government that actively promotes digital growth. Similarly, Namibia also has a relatively more stable economy than Zimbabwe. However, our findings reveal that the adoption of AI tools is progressing slowly in all three contexts' community media newsrooms, primarily due to scepticism and challenges related to knowledge, access, and costs. The integration is much slower in Zimbabwe than in Namibia and South Africa.

Community newspaper journalists in the three contexts largely take a sceptical approach in integrating AI in their news production routines. AI integration is largely done at the individual journalist level rather than at the institutional level. One interviewee (ZJ4) said, "AI is yet to penetrate community newspapers, particularly those under the *New Ziana* stable, owing largely to slow adaptation of new technology by management." This view was corroborated by another interviewee (ZJ3):

As a community newspaper, we have yet to embrace AI tools in newsgathering and content creation. However, individuals in newsrooms have gone to great lengths to equip themselves with AI and other tools, such as Poe, which they use for fact verification and background checks.

Due to this sceptical approach and absence of laid-down institutional policies for AI integration, the supposed affordances of AI tools in the journalistic value chain, as well as in enhancing citizen participation, are yet to be fully realised.

Some of the journalists in these community newspapers lack the requisite skills to productively manipulate these technologies in their news workflows. Consequently, these journalists mainly rely on common entry-level AI tools. Most respondents underscored that there is a need for community journalists to be trained to cope with the demands and challenges presented by AI. One interviewee said:

I feel that community media journalists are not adequately trained to use AI tools in their news gathering activities as evidenced by its poor usage in their newsrooms. Management is also not adequately informed about AI usage, hence its poor adaptability by the whole organisation. (ZJ2)

Critically, there is also the contestation of what kind of training these community journalists would require. AI in newsrooms is still an emerging technology, and it is not clear what kind of training is desired. Most respondents indicated that there is little employer support for empowering journalists with the relevant skills to cope with AI. However, the Media Institute of Southern Africa, among others, was commended for training journalists in AI use in newsroom production routines. It was noted that there is still a need for more advanced and specialised training to fully harness AI's potential in community journalism.

Moreover, the structure of community media makes adopting AI from a community-participation perspective problematic. This is largely because some of the community media, especially in Zimbabwe, are "one-man organisations." The Zimbabwean case best illustrates our point. There are also a number of

privately owned small-scale newspapers operating as community media, despite being sole proprietorships of individuals or companies. Most of these newspapers are registered under the Community Newspaper Association of Zimbabwe. Kwekwe, a mining town in the Midlands province, has the highest number of such privately-owned “community” newspapers. These include *The Midlands Observer* (established in 1952 by the Midlands Rhodesian Press Limited), *Midlands News*, *Weekend Gazette*, and *Guiding Star*. Masvingo Province has *Tell Zim*. Under such circumstances, the attitudes, fears, and concerns of the owners influence how and when AI should be integrated into the news ecosystem. In some of these newsrooms, the owner serves as the editor, marketing manager, and publisher. Most of these newsrooms are understaffed and juniorised; they rely on interns from colleges and universities who are on work-related learning. Due to financial constraints, such media houses struggle to procure AI technologies and software required in news production.

In the three contexts, most community newspapers have not yet fully integrated AI into their news production ecosystems. However, we note that in Zimbabwe, privately owned community newspapers have made significant strides in AI adoption compared with state-owned community newspapers. Some editors at state-owned community newspapers said AI adoption is still at a basic, individual level. There is no policy governing AI adoption. Plausibly, the reluctance to integrate these technologies is influenced by the government’s lack of interest and policy toward fusing the technologies. But blaming the government might not provide a true picture in the community newspaper terrain. This is because in Namibia, where the government is not directly involved in community newspapers, AI integration is also relatively slow. This applies equally to the South African context.

The sceptical approach to AI integration among community newspaper journalists can be attributed to the potential threats posed by AI. Most journalists are sceptical about AI, especially its ongoing association with the mass production of misinformation and disinformation (Bontridder & Poulet, 2021; Helmus, 2022). Some journalists believe that AI enables the easy production and distribution of fake news and leaves most tasks to machines rather than human beings. The ability to detect misinformation and disinformation comes with journalistic experience. Some journalists from Namibia were sceptical about AI’s role in advancing grassroots democracy due to its perceived entanglement with disinformation. One journalist said, “AI could be a very dangerous tool, especially in spreading misinformation and biased information—something politicians are prone to do when it serves their purpose” (NM4). The challenge community media are experiencing is that they no longer have experienced staff after suffering massive staff turnover in recent years (Munoriyarwa & Chiumbu, 2024). ZJ4 said:

Very little support is coming from the organisation to enable employees to acquire new skills to cope or survive in the AI arena, which I think also contributes to this media constituency’s demise. However, journalists are sometimes released to attend such workshops organised by organisations such as Zimbabwe Union of Journalists and the Media Institute of Southern Africa, but in most cases, the time will be limited as they are just half-day workshops. (ZJ4)

The challenges of disinformation become even worse, considering that most of these community newsrooms cannot afford to acquire AI tools that detect disinformation and misinformation. There are several AI-powered tools for detecting disinformation and misinformation, such as The Factual, Logically, and Full Fact (van der Lans, 2021). While some of these tools are free, for example, The Factual (a tool

offered as an extension on Chrome), some of the tools require a subscription. For newsrooms already struggling financially, subscribing to misinformation/disinformation-detecting technology is a huge call. All these factors combine to militate against community media's democratic role. Newsrooms foreground survival and technological acquisition at the expense of the "classical" focus on societal expectations. Consequently, journalists feel peripheralised because their newsrooms are unable to integrate AI.

Slow adoption of AI can also be attributed to financial constraints in these newsrooms. The selection of AI tools is informed by affordability rather than efficiency. For example, they are experiencing a sustainability crisis. Media sustainability refers to the media's capacity to operate effectively under sound political, legal, and economic conditions (Lush, 2025). The sustainability crisis faced by these community media can be attributed to declining advertising revenue and philanthropic support. Donors have also always been among community media's mainstream funders, providing equipment, programming, and capacity-building through training. Such donors include International Media Support, Fojo Institute (Sweden), among others. One of the interviewees said:

The biggest challenge we face is insufficient funds to purchase licensed AI tools. As a result, we rely on trial versions, such as ChatGPT and Canvas. The challenge is that when you use them three or four times, you can be restricted from using them for a certain period. However, these trial versions were very effective and made our job easier. For example, the time taken to edit a video or coming up with a story was reduced by 50%. We have also become effective in distributing content, thanks to these AI tools....Some do not have trial versions, hence, even if they are effective, we cannot use them due to affordability issues. Efficiency also influences our selection of tools, but affordability is the key issue that guides us. (ZJ4)

Our study also notes that the sceptical approach evident in the integration of AI technologies could also be a result of some AI language tools' incompatibility with indigenous African languages. These technologies are imported from the Global North. Consequently, they struggle with pronouncing terms and names in indigenous African languages. One journalist said, "We need our own local AI tools that are compatible with our languages. At times it's difficult to send an audio or video with an American accent to Zaka, Mwenezi. Some audiences may find the videos unpalatable" (ZJ3). Contrastingly, another journalist argued that AI helps make delivering reports/video reports easier and quicker (NM3).

6.3. AI-Induced External Shocks Disrupting the Field

The study noted limited AI literacy amongst some respondents across the three countries. Some South African and Namibian journalists did not answer the question of whether AI enhances community participation. Specifically one Zimbabwean journalist (ZJ2) left it blank, while a Namibian journalist (NM3) stated they had no idea, about the question: How best can people's participation in community media be enhanced in the AI age? Similarly, SA4 did not answer the question on whether AI enhances community participation. This, we argue, is evidence of a lack of understanding of AI and partly explains why AI hasn't been fully integrated into community media news production practices. These journalists' restricted AI literacy can be attributed to habitus, that is, entrenched habits, skills, and dispositions. In essence, these community journalists' deeply held beliefs about community journalism practice, and their limited knowledge shape their scepticism toward AI integration, which, in turn, influences how they interact with

the technology in the field. In other words, habitus is the dispositions that people have accumulated throughout their lives, as expressed through their attitudes and behaviours towards issues (Munoriyarwa & Chiumbu, 2023). As SA5 remarks:

Once AI makes news, there will be no more meaning for the “community” in “community media.” The essence is diluted. The whole practice of inclusion becomes exclusion because the community is now served by text-generating software. Remember, these community newspapers are a preserve of the community.

This raises the question: How is this autonomy coloured by the advent of AI in newsrooms? From the responses above, it is coloured by detrimental alterations to the complexion of community news production. But it should be understood that AI is being introduced to newsrooms by people, most likely journalists themselves. Thus, at the centre of this is a trained AI-literate journalist. One journalist noted this contradiction:

We should not forget the irony that no one is bringing AI to newsrooms except journalists. And this is where the problem is. Most of us in community media do not even understand how AI works, but here we are, embracing a technology whose functions we do not understand. So, for me, all the optimism and pessimism around AI is based on nothing but a lack of knowledge of the technology. However, I would disagree with a technology that writes texts for me. I think this dilutes the essence of the community. (SA4)

AI-related consequences, such as the generation of fake news, disinformation, and misinformation, were a key concern amongst respondents. As one journalist noted:

Journalists become too reliant on AI, often to the detriment of publications and the spread of misinformation. This is a real problem, especially with junior staff who often don’t know the “story behind the story” and submit what AI delivers as gospel. (NM2)

One of the contributing causes of such problems is the lack of training among community media journalists, which, in turn, compromises their uptake of AI. One journalist noted that:

I feel that community media journalists are not adequately trained to use AI tools in their news-gathering activities, as evidenced by their poor usage in their newsrooms. Management is also insufficiently informed about AI use, which is why the organisation’s overall adaptability is poor. (ZJ2)

We contend that journalists’ fear of AI is influenced by the perceived threat it poses to their symbolic capital. AI can arguably be viewed as part and parcel of what Bourdieu (1984) terms external shocks, which disrupt the power relations in the field of journalism. These are influences from outside the journalistic field that impact it; such shocks can reshape journalistic perceptions and practices. This is because the fields are distinctly structured by power relations, with various forms of capital valued differently across fields (see Bourdieu, 1990). Editors and journalists, among others, occupy different places with different powers in the community media field. Similarly, community newspapers occupy certain places in the communities they operate in. Consequently, the advent of AI makes journalists primarily concerned about the loss of their power or roles and of community and grassroots democracy. The established frameworks governing community media operations and journalistic practices are increasingly threatened by AI-induced disruptions.

6.4. Implications for Community Participation/Grassroots Democracy

Grassroots democracy is about providing quality information and alternative information (Ritchey-Vance, 1997). An important yardstick of democracy is who gets to speak and where they speak (Bozo, 2014), and what they get to speak about. Community newspapers are open spaces that allow citizens to speak back to power (Birowo, 2010) and robustly participate in communal discourses. These newspapers have traditionally been sources around which grassroots democracy is built (Saeed, 2009). In Africa, where, relative to radio and television, newspapers have expanded rapidly, they are central to the democratic project. Newspapers' centrality to the democratic processes becomes legendary in African contexts where political elites tightly control other media (Norris, 2005). In Southern Africa, community newspapers have expanded faster than radio and television because the political elites have given them room to expand.

Our findings show varied readings amongst journalists on whether AI enhances community participation. Whereas some journalists from South African and Namibian community newspapers did not believe that AI enhances community participation, Zimbabwean journalists and some Namibian journalists thought otherwise. However, other Namibian and South African journalists believe that AI will doom community participation. The reasons for this pessimism were AI's production of fake news and the mechanical reproduction of stories, which takes away the humaneness of community media. For example, SA1 argued that, "I don't think AI can enable community participation. Community news is very personal to the community and cannot be replicated by AI. The community needs to be educated about identifying AI-generated content and falsehoods." Similarly, NM1 stated that AI tools spell doom for community media because they make the production and distribution of fake news easy: "The participatory democracy of the grassroots community will be doomed...as the voice of ordinary citizens will be suppressed with full of manipulations [sic] that will lead to false reporting."

In other words, interaction will no longer be between journalists and audiences but between audiences and machines. As SA1 noted, "At the moment, community participation is based on personal interaction with the journalist and communicating via social media. I don't think AI has a role to play at the moment." The same sentiments are shared by NM3 who claimed that, "I think AI by and large does away with the humanity of a project. AI is a fantastic tool to use for the mundane and repetitive tasks, but the tasks requiring humanity should be left to humans."

In contrast, Zimbabwean and Namibian journalists with a more optimistic view of AI's role in community media argued that AI increases audience engagement, improves storytelling, and helps produce content that aligns with audience interests. They also argued that AI helps in audience targeting, i.e., producing and delivering specific content for specific demographics, and reporting "data-heavy topics [and producing] multimedia content like video summaries of articles" (NM2). AI was also said to enable real-time feedback, provide automated translations, make content creation easy and quick, and help community media compete with larger media outlets. For example, ZJ2 stated that, "AI tools allow us to quickly generate content/stories." It was also argued that "AI-powered algorithms can recommend stories to readers based on their interests, increasing engagement and helping local news compete with larger outlets" (NM4). Finally, it was noted that "AI can support grassroots democracy by enabling data-driven reporting, amplifying underrepresented voices, and fostering transparency" (ZJ1).

The intersection of AI and democratic processes represents one of the most consequential technological shifts in modern political history (George & Klaus, 2026). Despite the predominantly sceptical approach towards AI adoption in the Southern African community media, some journalists expressed optimism that these technologies can also enhance grassroots participatory democracy. The response from one Namibian respondent illustrates our point:

At our newspaper, we currently do not utilise AI tools in our reporting or operations... Community-based journalism thrives on understanding and reflecting its audience's needs and interests. AI could enhance this by analysing local trends, social media discussions, and feedback to help identify the most relevant stories to cover. It could also assist in tailoring content for specific demographics, ensuring community news reaches and resonates with a wider audience. In the context of transitioning to digital news, AI can help optimise digital platforms. For example, AI-powered algorithms can recommend stories to readers based on their interests, increasing engagement and helping local news compete with larger outlets. Additionally, AI tools can aid in the efficient production of digital content, such as automating routine tasks like transcription, basic reporting on data-heavy topics, or creating multimedia content like video summaries of articles. (NM1)

Importantly, participation can be enhanced through AI-driven tools that allow real-time feedback, localised content, automated translations, training community members in digital literacy to engage meaningfully, and capacitating, upskilling, and training journalists in AI integration in newsrooms. However, AI risks marginalising voices if not used inclusively or ethically. The findings show that the media landscape has been disrupted at the level of production, distribution, and consumption, yet most journalists lack skills in the use of AI tools.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings show that there is a slow, uneven uptake of the very basic AI applications within Southern African community newspapers. We further note that the slow, uneven uptake is determined by the available free AI applications and journalists' relatively low knowledge of AI tools. We also note widespread scepticism about AI tools amongst journalists. This scepticism is drawn from a lack of knowledge of what AI tools can do to community newspaper reporting. Can they enhance news reporting practices? Can they disrupt? What is the extent of their efficacy in what we call the "community" news? All these questions, difficult to answer at the moment, have increased the sense of scepticism for community media journalists. Lastly, our findings show that AI affects the community newspaper's democratic role. As journalists put it, the sense of community is destroyed once machines generate community news whilst the democratic role of community media is undermined by AI's noted production of disinformation and deepfakes.

This study provides one of the first comprehensive assessments of how Southern African community newsrooms are adopting and using AI. The research finds that AI tools are already used for tasks such as news summarisation, transcription, and content drafting, yet adoption remains informal and uneven across organisations. Most journalists reported receiving little to no formal training on AI, raising concerns about ethical use, accuracy, and the risk of declining public trust. This highlights the urgent need for structured training, clear editorial guidelines, and the development of tools tailored to African community newspapers, languages, and contexts.

Theoretically, our article makes several arguments. First, AI technologies represent a significant existential disruption for community newspaper journalists. AI disrupts news reporting/gathering, production, dissemination, and how community newspapers govern their communal spaces. Secondly, AI represents a disruption because it prompts community newspapers to rethink how they can maintain their legitimacy as disseminators of community news. But positively, AI technologies can make it easier for community newspapers to perform tasks such as content moderation, fact-checking, and writing news without significantly widening their labour force (Larsen & Naper, 2022). This is a positive disruption, although it is tempered by questions of access to these technologies. As a negative disruption, AI technologies raise questions of the community newspaper's communityness and sustainability. Our interviews show mixed views about the future of the community newspaper and its sustainability under the current AI-induced disruption.

Furthermore, AI technologies impact the community newspapers' communicative autonomy, reciprocal knowledge exchange, and long-term responsibility. Community newspapers, as we noted, are embedded in their communities' news production routines. This means they serve the community's educative, entertainment, and information needs. Broadly, their goals are two-fold: achieving communal impact and intimacy. They achieve impact by covering local news and information needs—health, sport, crime, policing, etc. Community newspapers achieve impact by providing commentary and opinion on social justice issues affecting the specific community. This is linked to how they achieve intimacy—by reporting for the community, representing their voices, being closer to them, and knowing their information needs. This requires access to unique news and information sources specific to their communities. However, once technologies like generative AI come into this ecosystem, the sense of “communityness” created by this bond is coloured differently. What the communities end up consuming will not be community news, built by community media journalists with a deep understanding of these specific communities. Rather, it is news generated by machines, driven by algorithmised virality. Community journalists and their newspapers should actively construct, represent, and maintain social groups (Larsen & Naper, 2022). This is how they create a sense of “community” which does not create boundaries of marginalisation. AI technologies do not guarantee these. As one journalist noted, “We are not even sure of the harm they can cause to our traditional community-based reporting” (NM3). Already, community newspaper journalists know how to frame their community news. For example, in South Africa, communities like Thembelihle are often discursively constructed through “prisms of violence” or “suffering,” which reinforces specific power dynamics between the state and the people (Malherbe et al., 2021). This framing is a conscious process determined by the community media journalists themselves. AI news technologies do not possess this level of consciousness. They will not be the glue that integrates local communities into the news while also playing a watchdog role. Furthermore, the civic role of community journalists is likely to be compromised by AI, as journalists themselves noted. The participatory nature and collaborative outlook of community newspaper journalism will likely be sacrificed by AI expediency.

This is further exacerbated by the fact that, as respondents noted, there are currently very few AI technologies available in indigenous African languages. The absence of local-language AI negatively impacts local participation and undermines the sense of community amongst community newspapers. Most AI tools that African newspapers utilise are largely designed in English. Yet, many community newspapers use indigenous African languages. Admittedly, there are several AI start-ups in Southern Africa producing AI technologies in local indigenous languages. However, they have not yet reached the level where these

technologies influence news production. There will always be a disjunction between what these technologies are likely to produce and what the communities actually want. In communities raised on the staple of local-language community news, AI becomes a ruinous disruption to their bond with local journalism.

Future research could focus on radio and/or television, and how AI disruptions may shape their contributions to community participation. It could also focus on the perceptions of community media audiences regarding AI-generated news.

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