

The Digital Tide Must Lift All

Bridging the Digital Divide in Community Media in South Africa

Case Study: SANEF Community Media Digitisation Drive 2023–2024

By Chris Mcinga- MeD8 Media, Implementation Partner

A Sector in Crisis

As digital transformation sweeps through global media, South Africa's community publications face existential challenges. Local newsrooms serving rural and township communities struggle with outdated systems, minimal digital skills, and dwindling revenue streams. The South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) recognized this critical gap and appointed MeD8 Media to implement an ambitious solution: transitioning 15 carefully selected community media outlets from traditional only platforms to digital included operations. Our team's proven expertise in media transformation positioned us perfectly to lead this vital work—not just building websites, but creating lasting digital platforms for community media outlets carrying voices that deserve to be heard.

Why This Matters - The Purpose of the Project

For twelve months, MeD8 Media has executed a targeted intervention in South Africa's community media landscape. This marked the first time SANEF had undertaken such a comprehensive digital transformation initiative specifically designed for hyperlocal publishers operating in underserved communities, many publishing in indigenous languages.

Unlike mainstream media outlets with established digital infrastructure, these community publications—often the only source of local news in their regions—were being left behind in the digital revolution. Many operated solely in print or broadcast formats with no online presence, limited revenue options, and rapidly diminishing audiences as readers migrated to digital platforms.

The mission transcended mere technological upgrades; it aimed to preserve crucial information channels in communities where mainstream media rarely venture. In townships and rural areas across South Africa, these publications report on local governance issues, community development, cultural events, and grassroots initiatives that would otherwise go undocumented.

They maintain indigenous language journalism when most online content remains dominated by English and Afrikaans.

Breaking Digital Ground - Implementation

Reality quickly set in once we began working with our partners. Three of the 15 organizations faced fundamental technological barriers that we hadn't fully anticipated. Some team members struggled with basic internet navigation, had minimal digital literacy, and found content management systems like WordPress challenging.

Rather than giving up, these organizations demonstrated remarkable commitment by bringing new people onto their teams specifically to support digital operations. We trained these recruits through our programme, and today they successfully maintain and run their websites independently.

Business planning revealed another critical challenge. Years of operating under Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) grant funding had created problematic habits. Publishers were accustomed to printing newspapers regardless of economic viability, simply because grant conditions required it. This disconnection from market realities left many with unrealistic expectations about digital transformation.

We encountered ambitious plans for podcasting studios and sophisticated multimedia operations without corresponding business models or resource commitments. Several publishers wanted to immediately launch podcasts, seeing them as an exciting new medium, but hadn't considered production requirements, audience development strategies, or monetization approaches. When we discussed the resource commitments required—dedicated staff time, equipment costs, promotion needs, and the challenge of building listener bases from scratch—many reconsidered their timelines or chose to focus first on strengthening their core digital publishing operations.

These challenges had to be managed delicately, balancing honesty about operational realities without discouraging partners who were taking their first digital steps. We focused conversations on sustainable growth paths that matched each publisher's capacity while still inspiring digital innovation appropriate to their contexts.

Building From the Ground Up - The Approach

We structured the project in two distinct phases. We began with a careful Pilot Phase involving four publishers who had no online presence and limited digital skills. Working closely with them, we provided step-by-step guidance through website setup and management. This test phase proved invaluable, allowing us to identify common challenges, refine our support methods, and anticipate similar issues before rolling out to the remaining partners.

For each publisher, we developed a personalized onboarding process. We assessed their digital literacy levels, business model, language needs, and editorial workflows before helping them set

up a WordPress-powered website with a custom dashboard tailored to their specific capabilities and challenges.

Throughout the process, we emphasized ownership and identity. Each website needed to authentically represent the publisher's audience through visual identity and editorial approach. We encouraged partners to make design decisions reflecting their community's character rather than imposing standardized templates. This approach fostered pride and investment in their digital platforms.

The team had to apply change management tactics to gradually help the publishers understand the importance of publishing online and not having a print copy first approach. Getting them in the mindset that when an article is factual and has gone through editorial processes it can be published online immediately was crucial. We emphasized that if developments occur later, they could update the existing article, helping increase consistency and publishing frequency.

The second rollout phase incorporated lessons from our pilot experience. We created separate WhatsApp groups for each publisher, ensuring our team could provide immediate assistance whenever challenges arose. This direct communication channel proved essential for building confidence among partners taking their first digital steps.

Site Visits - Coalface View of Reality

Our team had to do site visits after the group workshop to have hands-on training with the publications/radio stations staff to ensure that the message shared during the workshop was not diluted but emphasized as we understood the challenges of embracing change. The site visits proved to be useful for the project as they aimed to do 3 things.

First was to get a better understanding of the environment in which the publishers/radio stations were operating in. This environment assessment was both from our observation of the commercial opportunities like business activity in the various towns, to testing internet connectivity signal from the offices or home offices they operate from and assessing the equipment the participants' staff were using. This helped our team best match those observations with the angle to use when training the staff. This assessment was followed by a questionnaire to the publisher or station manager on items such as who is your competitor, what makes your product better and also how they recruit staff and retain them. Almost like a SWOT analysis session, we had to make it realistic and understood so that it would live longer in their minds after we leave.

The second part of the site visit was to conduct change management to the owner of the media outlet. This was more in line with feeding concepts they could adopt from a business point of view and expose them to other participants' wins and losses in order to be creatively inspired and to avoid already made mistakes.

The third part, which to our team was very important, was to create a "vibe" - positivity, energy, and innovative juices. This was felt as we could see ideas flowing from junior staff members giving ideas on what they will contribute.

Notable is the team from North Coast Radio in Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal. North Coast Radio Station, established in 2003 and licensed in 2008, 2014, and 2019, is dedicated to delivering relevant, empowering, accurate, and reliable information to the communities of uMhlathuze and the King Cetshwayo District. Their commitment goes beyond just broadcasting; they aim to enhance the quality of life for their listeners while promoting traditional culture both locally and globally. As the leading local community radio station in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, they focus on providing a platform that encourages equal rights and opportunities for women, supports youth development, and fosters cohesion between rural and urban areas.

The team composition was that of Founder of the Radio station and chairman of the board Carl Modise, head of Advertising SITHEMBILE ZONDO, Station manager, radio program presenters, front office (receptionist and admin controller) and other interns who participate in the various programs on air. This was the largest team we had to train in a group training session that allowed for input, brainstorming new production processes and how to integrate TikTok to the media mix.

We observed that they were still writing news bulletins on pen and paper and reading it out on air from an exam notebook without having any digital backup of the news article. This posed many risks as we highlighted during the session, as this community is prone to have floods and the content could be destroyed. Having experienced such a flood in their studio, we could notice the damage it had done on their equipment and servers, and this message of having a digital copy of all news items was critical.

Team members also volunteered to be brands on TikTok and promote the station as opposed to the station having their own TikTok account that would have to be managed and maintained. This was welcomed as community radio stations are the springboard to new upcoming radio presenters that get recruited by bigger stations, which is something the station welcomes and is proud of as they would have given the individual an opportunity.

A revelation was had during this session from the Founder as he spontaneously said, "WOW we are now competing with our local newspaper." The penny dropped that they are now not just a radio station that focuses on entertainment, information, and interviews, now they could really compete on a journalism front as they have the feet on the ground in areas that the local newspaper, which primarily is focused on suburbia, urban and peri-urban communities, doesn't reach. This station could now focus more on rural and township level news.

Another example of a dynamic newsroom that benefited from the site visits is that of a publication in Polokwane City in Limpopo. Seipone newspaper (<https://seiponemadireng.co.za/>), published by Diphete Bopape, is published by Balaodi Publishers cc, a 100% black-owned and managed enterprise. The first issue of Seipone saw the light of the day on 13 August 2002 when the paper was launched as a trilingual newspaper publishing in Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda. In 2007, the paper dropped Xitsonga and Tshivenda and only remained with Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi as the only publishing language.

The Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB) provided seeding funding as part of a long-term plan to establish newspapers in African languages. In addition, PanSALB provided support

for the paper through sponsorship of marketing efforts for the paper. Published as a monthly in the first year of its life, the newspaper became a fortnightly publication on its first birthday in August 2003 to date, and still aims to achieve its goal of being a weekly paper in the future.

Publisher Dr. Mosibudi Mangena, writer and former Minister of Science and Technology, emphasized the importance of preserving the language during this digitization drive. He too wished that his print circulation could extend further than the geographic print distribution footprint in order for the newspaper's content to reach and be accessed by other Sesotho sa Leboa/Sepedi, Xitsonga, and Tshivenda speaking people in South Africa and abroad. With his pride for his newspaper, an easy PDF version of his print editions was the low-hanging fruit, and with his excitement of doing that, we had to pull down his existing website and rebuild to allow the capabilities of making his product available as e-editions.

The team, of which each individual wore multiple hats such as writing and distributing the print edition and some selling adverts and reporting, could see that the introduction of this project would add extra work. Not being intimidated by this, they embraced the concept and understood that using digital tools can help carry the load. The existing workflow for publishing in this newspaper was that of first printing the newspaper then sending to a web developer to copy and paste the subbed and proofread (Print Ready) copy to the clunky website they had. We had to fix this and tell them that they could upload on the CMS and do corrections like they normally do on Word or they can use Word and copy-paste and not have to wait for the paper to be printed. The mindset was still around their print production cycle of which we had to share the benefits of publishing and letting stories develop or else they would face printing old news that is already out on social media.

Another site visit worth mentioning is that of The Eastern Cape Women's Magazine, a bilingual (Xhosa and English) small commercial provincial magazine which was initiated by a community journalist with a mission to create a platform for Eastern Cape Women to inform the public of their development initiatives. The magazine was established in 2006 and was officially launched in 2007 by the office of Executive Mayor of O.R. Tambo District Municipality by Mrs. Zoleka Capa. Currently, the project has two offices, one in Lusikisiki in Zalu Hills Multipurpose Center donated by the Department of Public Works and the other at Mthatha in the premises of the Walter Sisulu University (former Unitra).

Currently, the magazine is operating without a funder or sponsor but it has produced three issues with the assistance of businesswomen who are keen to see it on the shelves. The main objectives of the magazine are to profile the work or initiatives done by women in the Eastern Cape, especially those involved in rural development, and also to promote the culture of reading and writing amongst the people of the Eastern Cape.

Published by Pamela Timakwe, a strong activist for women in rural communities, this was also an eye-opener as they do not operate from an office but from the publisher's home. We had to conduct the site visit from a hotel conference room many kilometers away from their rural community as we did not have the facilities to conduct the site visit.

With a team of 6 comprising 2 permanent and 4 interns, this was one that we believe needed more attention and is still struggling as interns abscond and leave the publisher without resources to function. After the training, they experienced an almost 100% walkout due to the interns feeling that there were no benefits for them to help drive the magazine despite having the platform to learn more and be empowered. This is a common occurrence as there is a sense of expectation of getting instant gratification in monetary form as they are coming from a really impoverished community with very limited opportunities.

This newsroom uses local taxis to get around in a vast area with many hills between villages. This also includes having to walk from a taxi rank (drop-off area) to where they need to go. This is both dangerous and time-consuming. The area they cover, Mthatha, in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, has reported challenges with murder cases, including having the most cases of murder in the province. The Eastern Cape province has been identified as having the highest per capita murder rate in the country, with 20 murders per 100,000 people between July and September 2024. The publisher is still optimistic despite her challenges and is trying her best to keep up.

The main kicker for us as the project leaders of this digitization is that it brings joy to our hearts to have newsrooms and radio stations welcome us to their operation as they are all working in silos and are not exposed to what others are doing in the sector.

Practical Technology for Real Needs

Our selection of WordPress as the content management system (CMS) was deliberate and strategic. While evaluating options like Newspack and Drupal, we identified WordPress as offering the most advantages for small independent news organizations.

WordPress's extensive open-source community makes countless third-party modules available, allowing integration with common digital marketing platforms and flexible expansion of functionality. The abundance of free tutorials on basic site management provides publishers with continued learning resources beyond our formal training.

Crucially, we considered sustainability beyond the program's duration. WordPress's widespread adoption in South Africa means local developers are readily available if publishers need to modify or enhance their sites in the future. The platform's intuitive interface also reduces the learning curve for new team members joining these small organizations.

We implemented a WordPress Multisite approach, enabling centralized management of key plugins and security updates across all 15 websites. This architecture allowed our technical team to efficiently address cybersecurity concerns while giving publishers full control over their content. The multisite structure also simplified user management, allowing us to assist with password resets and journalist profile creation during the critical early adoption phase.

This approach significantly reduced costs by centralizing certain licenses while maintaining individualized websites. To date, we have encountered no significant disadvantages to this

implementation model—a notable achievement considering the diverse technical environments and skill levels involved.

Tools That Transform Production

Understanding that community newsrooms are both understaffed and under-resourced, we introduced practical tools to reduce their dependence on outsourced services like ad design, proposal creation, and newspaper layout.

The prohibitive cost of Adobe Creative Suite licenses and the high-specification computers required to run them had previously forced many publishers to outsource their design work. We trained partners to use the free version of Canva, establishing workflows that allowed them to create and edit designs even on mobile phones. This capability was particularly valuable for publishers constantly moving between community events and their offices.

Some publishers requested access to Canva's paid features, which led to an important principle that guided our entire project: we would provide premium tools only if publishers could demonstrate how they would generate revenue to sustain these tools beyond our program. This approach encouraged strategic thinking about tool adoption.

Canva is now used not just for advertisement creation but also for designing professional proposals and rate cards. While this tool may seem straightforward to many users, it represented a significant learning curve for some publishers who have now mastered its basic functions.

For North Coast Radio, we implemented SoundCloud to host interviews that they wanted to embed within website articles. This integration created a more engaging user experience while extending the life of their broadcast content.

AI generative platforms like ChatGPT were introduced to assist with proofreading and creating SEO-friendly headlines. Initially, this represented a major mindset shift for publishers with no previous exposure to AI tools. Today, many regularly use these platforms for tasks ranging from email composition to sentence structure improvements, particularly valuable for English-language publications.

We also established video editing workflows and YouTube channel setups for partners interested in multimedia content. While these platforms show promise, no publisher or radio station has yet achieved significant viewership numbers—a reminder that building digital audiences requires persistent effort over time.

Support Structures That Last

To ensure sustainable impact beyond our direct involvement, we built dedicated platforms to support the project and its future growth.

The Community Media Support Services website (<https://communitymss.co.za/>) was established as an independent brand designed to outlive the SANEF project itself. This approach eliminated reliance on telephone support or printed manuals that quickly become outdated as technology evolves.

The site's "Learn" section hosts categorized modules covering every aspect of digital publishing, from basic WordPress usage to advanced multimedia production. These guides are continuously updated as we introduce new tools and techniques. Video tutorials and step-by-step instructions support newsrooms dealing with staff turnover—a common challenge when relying on volunteers or minimally compensated freelancers.

We also publish sector updates to keep publishers informed about broader industry developments. The platform is accessible to anyone in South Africa interested in digital news production, extending our impact beyond direct program participants.

Additionally, we created ePress (electronic press - <https://epress.co.za/>), which initially was conceived as a news aggregator but evolved into a discovery platform for media buyers. This shift came after recognizing that individual publishers lacked sufficient visibility to attract advertising planners. In its early stages, ePress has already generated paid advertising opportunities for both print and online publications, demonstrating its potential to become more than a directory but a genuine lead generation and ad booking platform for community newsrooms.

"Without a platform, you don't have a vehicle to carry content. Without support, you can't drive that platform to reach and grow your audience. And without financial backing, you can't sustain the project. These three elements form the foundation of digital media sustainability," says Chris Mcinga, project leader.

The Impact So Far

By the programme's completion, we had successfully built, upgraded or customized 15 WordPress websites, each designed for its particular environment and audience. More than 32 publishers and staff members received intensive training in digital publishing, multimedia production, and workflow management.

The impact has extended beyond our original scope. Seven additional publishers, seeing the success of our original partners, have independently contracted for similar services, paying for the same digital transformation experience. This organic growth demonstrates the recognized value of our approach and suggests a sustainable model for continued sector development.

Our fortnightly "pop-in" training sessions and physical workshops saw consistent participation that exceeded expectations. These sessions have gained remarkable popularity, with 65 new subscribers opting to receive notifications about upcoming training opportunities. The Association of Independent Publishers has requested permission to share our training content with their broader membership, creating a multiplier effect beyond our direct partners.

Responding to this demand, we've begun developing short training videos focusing on AI applications for newsrooms. These resources are hosted on our Community Media Support Services YouTube channel, extending our reach and building capacity across the sector. This widespread industry endorsement confirms the critical need for continued digital support among community publishers.

Lessons From the Field

Our journey revealed several valuable insights that will shape future initiatives. We discovered that even publishers with no digital background can become fully operational online with proper onboarding and consistent support. WhatsApp-based support proved far more effective than traditional helpdesks, offering immediate interaction when publishers encountered problems—an approach we'll maintain going forward.

We watched as peer-to-peer learning flourished amongst partners, creating deeper engagement and knowledge sharing than we had anticipated. The AI tools we introduced saved time and improved content quality, especially for small teams with limited editorial capacity—proving that technology, when properly adapted, can empower rather than intimidate.

Publishers particularly appreciated being treated as equals and given ownership of their platforms from day one. The emphasis on language-inclusive publishing—with content in isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sesotho, Sepedi and more—helped build loyal, hyperlocal digital audiences that might otherwise remain underserved online.

We also discovered that publishers struggled significantly with promotion and advertising sales—a crucial aspect of sustainability. In response, we developed professional profiles for each publication along with digital rate cards and proposals they could use when approaching potential advertisers. These materials have empowered publishers to better position themselves in a competitive market and create new revenue streams.

Out-take: "Sustain-the-Ability: Enduring Over Time"

We had to define sustainability from the onset and crystallize it in order to embed it in the publishers' business. Our broad definition was that when you are out of the program you would have the ability to run the digital asset by yourself. This concept, while simple, focuses on the essence of sustainability.

From our internal perspective, we understood that publishers already faced the global challenge of finding alternative revenue models. Many had expectations of generating substantial online advertising revenue, but reality often proved different. During our early onboarding workshops, we introduced sections dedicated to business models, designed by Steve Kromberg from Social Weaver, a company that delivers training and consulting in content creation, strategic communication and management.

Social Weaver played a significant role in the early stages of the digitization drive, helping establish the project framework. The Business Development and Alternative Revenue Streams section drew from cases studied during the AIP-USA Embassy trip that Steve Kromberg and Chris Mcinga attended at Ohio University during the project. These models included subscription-based revenues, newsletter advertising, donation models (encouraging readers to support journalism as a public good), and newsrooms partnering with community events as media partners. Other models included merchandise sales and service offerings like PR writing for companies.

While these models show promise, implementing them requires capacity that many newsrooms struggle to find amid daily operations. North West Times, with publisher Oratile Setae, has successfully implemented merchandising and events models, selling branded apparel and participating in community seminars as media partners. As a small team based in North West province, they take pride in their brand, viewing community support through merchandise purchases as evidence of trust and recognition.

Sustainability also requires newsrooms to reconsider their identity and embrace new opportunities. Jerry Sokuphe, publisher of Soweto Sunrise News, participated in a paid climate change reporting initiative that provided data for environmental stories. Such opportunities were previously difficult to pursue due to the unpredictable nature of print publishing. With reliable online platforms, publishers can now engage in such initiatives and receive compensation for their expertise.

Digital presence has addressed the "out of sight, out of mind" problem—publishers are now discoverable online, enhancing their credibility when applying for grants, approaching funders, and engaging with advertisers.

"Having worked at one of South Africa's largest community media owners with over 140 newspaper titles and participating in their digital transformation efforts, I've seen firsthand how challenging it remains to balance online growth without cannibalizing print revenue," notes Chris Mcinga. "Online advertising revenue is still a fraction of print revenue, even for major publishers who've been working on this challenge for two decades. But I've had to set aside that reality and focus on the potential for South Africa's independent community media sector to develop innovative solutions that might eventually solve problems that even the largest publishers continue to face."

The concept of sustainability, for us, is about "sustaining the ability"—simply enduring over time. The fact that publishers are now paying out of their pockets to maintain their digital platforms demonstrates they recognize the value, even when immediate financial returns aren't yet evident.

Where To From Here? - Looking Forward

The SANEF Community Media Digitisation Drive has laid a foundation that extends beyond South Africa. Our structure, onboarding process, training model, and support systems provide a blueprint that could be replicated across Africa where similar challenges exist.

In South Africa, our next phase includes expanding the CMSS platform with more resources and support features. We're particularly excited about our ePress platform's potential to make publishers discoverable by media buyers, which has already expanded beyond our original programme participants to benefit the wider community media sector.

To ensure long-term success, we've introduced a subscription-based support model. This gives publishers the choice to continue receiving assistance if they're not yet ready to operate fully independently—ensuring no one gets left behind as South Africa's media landscape continues to evolve.

As we continually keep pace with emerging technologies, particularly AI applications for news production, we immediately integrate these innovations into our training programs. This approach allows our partners to focus on producing quality, credible journalism for their communities while staying technologically current—a balance many would struggle to achieve independently.

As we reflect on this journey, we're reminded that digital transformation in community media isn't just about websites and tools—it's about preserving voices, strengthening communities, and ensuring diverse perspectives remain vital in our national conversation.

Spotlight on Izwi Lomphakathi Newspaper - IsiZulu Newspaper

One of our inspiring partnerships has been with Izwi Lomphakathi ("The Voice of the Community"), an isiZulu community newspaper based in Newcastle, KwaZulu-Natal. Founded by veteran journalist Langelihle Chagwe during the COVID-19 pandemic, this publication serves rural and previously marginalized communities with no digital presence before joining our program.

A year into his digital journey, the transformation has been remarkable. From zero online presence, Izwi Lomphakathi (<https://izwinews.co.za/>) now attracts between 3,000 and 7,000 pageviews monthly—sometimes outperforming publications that had established websites before our program began. They've developed an effective cross-platform strategy, using Facebook to market stories and WhatsApp to connect directly with readers.

This digital transition has opened doors to new revenue opportunities. For the first time, the newspaper is working with a media agency that serves isiZulu-translated banner ads from national brands—companies that had never advertised in their print edition.

"Seeing national brands on our website was a breakthrough moment for us," Chagwe told us during a recent check-in. "It showed us that going digital wasn't just about survival—it was about reaching new heights we couldn't have imagined before."

Spotlight on Phethoho News - South Sesotho Newspaper

Phethoho News serves communities across Mangaung Municipality and Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality in the Free State with accurate local reporting focused on strengthening social cohesion, promoting economic growth, and encouraging good governance.

Before joining the SANEF Digitisation Drive, they operated primarily as a print publication with 10,000 fortnightly copies, maintaining a basic Facebook page and website without strategic digital workflow. Their small four-person team, led by publisher David Mokotjo who managed multiple roles, struggled to maintain consistent digital operations while producing their print edition.

After a year in the program, Phethoho News has made modest but meaningful progress toward digital transformation. Their web traffic remains relatively low compared to other partners, partly reflecting the smaller population and limited internet access in their service area. This highlights an important reality: digital transformation in deeply rural communities requires longer timeframes and different success metrics.

Despite these challenges, the team has established structured digital publishing processes and now strategically uses their print newspaper to drive audience awareness of their online platforms with every edition.

"Having worked with the team leading this digitisation project, we have been inspired by the transparency and willingness to assist us as we navigate this space," says David Mokotjo. "We continue working with them especially in improving our print product to be a touch point for our online platform as we promote our news offer online. Thank you SANEF for this opportunity, we will continue with the services of Community Media Support Services to help us in year two."

Their story reminds us that meaningful digital transformation in community media isn't measured solely by traffic numbers, but by organizational capacity building, strategic integration of print and digital assets, and sustainable progression toward digital fluency.

Spotlight on Inkundla Yezindaba - isiZulu Newspaper

"Amplifying Community Voices in INK Region" | Inanda, Ntuzuma, KwaMashu, KwaZulu-Natal

Inkundla Yezindaba is a vibrant community newspaper based in the INK region — Inanda, Ntuzuma, and KwaMashu — situated about 20km northwest of Durban within the eThekweni Municipality. Recognised as part of South Africa's Urban Renewal Programme due to high poverty levels, this area is rich in culture and community spirit. Inkundla Yezindaba publishes content in isiZulu (60%) and English (40%), with a strong focus on social, cultural, and economic issues that shape the daily lives of their readers. The publication's mission is to inform, educate, and inspire, with the goal of building unity and pride within the community while using journalism as a tool for positive change.

The newspaper, founded and published by Zinhle Cebekhulu — a former community college lecturer turned successful media entrepreneur — already had a website

(<https://inkundlayezindaba.co.za/>) before joining the SANEF Digitisation Drive. However, while the website existed, it was developed by an intern, and the team lacked a structured digital workflow and strategy to maintain or grow the platform. Motivation and proper training were needed to show that managing both print and online publishing was possible and achievable even with a small team.

Before the digitisation support, Inkundla Yezindaba stayed relevant mainly through creative community engagement like hosting awards events, which built strong trust with their readership and strengthened relationships with the municipality. Adding a more active digital presence was a natural next step to align with their innovative spirit under Zinhle's leadership. The team of five operates from an entrepreneurial innovation hub, surrounded by other small businesses and start-ups, which they have smartly tapped into for shared services when needed.

Since participating in the Digitisation Drive, Inkundla Yezindaba's traffic has been slowly growing. While there's still a long road ahead to fully commercialise their digital platform, the groundwork is in place. Their pride in isiZulu language and culture puts them in a unique position to tap into an audience that wants news that speaks to their identity. The combination of print strength and a nurturing approach to digital will serve them well over time, especially as more people in their community shift to consuming news online.

Reflecting on the journey, publisher Zinhle Cebekhulu says, "The digitisation drive excited us as it gave us another bite at the apple. Despite us having operational challenges, we are happy that we still have a digital asset that is online and that we can nurture, as we can see that people are migrating online. Our print is still strong but we think that in time our readers will want us to do more online. The workshop we attended for this programme also helped us broaden our minds to possibilities. We appreciated the exposure to other publishers who are on the same boat as us."

The story of Inkundla Yezindaba shows that for community media based in culturally proud regions like INK, digitisation is not just about being online — it's about future-proofing trusted local voices and making sure they remain part of the next chapter of South African media.

Publisher Success Story: Icamagu Media

Icamagu Media represents the innovative fusion of traditional and digital platforms operating in some of South Africa's most underserved rural communities. Based outside East London in the Eastern Cape, publisher Lulama Mpahla leads this indigenous community news project that combines print publications with a digital radio station broadcasting primarily in isiXhosa—the province's most widely spoken language.

The project began with Icamagu Online Radio, broadcasting from a modest studio built behind Mpahla's home. Operating via satellite internet due to limited infrastructure, the station exemplifies the determination required to deliver media services in rural South Africa. When Icamagu Media joined the SANEF Digitisation Drive, they expanded their operation by launching an online news

platform (<https://icamaguonline.co.za/>), quickly realizing digital's potential when coverage of a major taxi violence incident generated over 10,000 impressions in a single month.

While this traffic surge resulted from an isolated event, it provided crucial motivation for the team to recognize the genuine opportunities in digital publishing. Today, Icamagu Media maintains a flexible approach—producing print editions on demand while focusing resources on growing their online audience. Their radio platform (<https://icamagulive.co.za/>) and news portal continue developing as essential voices for indigenous-language media in the Eastern Cape.

Their journey demonstrates how digital transformation can extend the reach of community media while preserving linguistic and cultural identity. By embracing both traditional and digital channels, Icamagu Media ensures vital community information reaches audiences regardless of connectivity challenges—a model of adaptation that strengthens South Africa's diverse media landscape.

Spotlight on Additional Digital Transformation Journeys

Highveld Chronicle - English & IsiZulu Newspaper

Highveld Chronicle (<https://hconline.co.za/>), published by Mfanzile Dlakunde, joined our program as part of the "haves" category—publications with existing online platforms facing significant challenges. Their website had been compromised through Facebook hacking incidents, and their digital presence required a complete rebuild.

We established their website within our secure WordPress environment, providing comprehensive training through the Community Media Support Services platform, virtual pop-in sessions, and dedicated support via their publication's WhatsApp group. Today, Highveld Chronicle consistently ranks in the top five publications for traffic performance among our program participants.

Their print edition maintains impressive strength with a regular printing cycle, verified by a Grass Root Certificate from the Audit Bureau of Circulations—South Africa's recognized print circulation auditing firm that verifies distribution figures and ensures newspapers reach their intended audiences.

Soweto Sunrise News - English Newspaper

Jerry Sokuphe, publisher of Soweto Sunrise News (<https://sowetosunrise.co.za/>), exemplifies entrepreneurial spirit in one of South Africa's most iconic communities. Operating primarily as a one-person operation supported by volunteers, Jerry has embraced digital tools with remarkable enthusiasm.

He has integrated Canva deeply into his production process, significantly enhancing both his website and newspaper's visual appeal. Taking innovation further, Jerry leads in utilizing AI tools like Meta AI to generate images that enhance his content—particularly valuable in an environment where stock photography access is limited and purchasing rights remains prohibitively expensive for small publishers.

This creative problem-solving has helped Soweto Sunrise News maintain its position among the top five best-performing websites in monthly traffic metrics, demonstrating how resourcefulness can overcome resource limitations.

Tshwane Bulletin - English Newspaper

Tshwane Bulletin (<https://www.tshwanebulletin.co.za/>), covering news throughout South Africa's capital city of Pretoria, represents a success story in balancing print sustainability with digital growth. Publisher Tebogo Modiba has maintained a strong print edition through consistent publication supported by a reliable advertiser base.

His eagerness to evolve by developing a digital platform that complements his print publication reflects forward-thinking leadership. This approach aims not just to increase revenue streams but also to introduce existing clients to new online audiences—creating a sustainable bridge between traditional and digital media models.

The Eye News - English Newspaper

Mashile Phalane from The Eye News in Limpopo Province faces significant challenges due to limited skilled personnel in his rural community. Recognizing these unique circumstances, our team has committed to providing extended support, essentially functioning as an extension of his newsroom until local capacity can be developed.

This tailored approach demonstrates our commitment to meeting publishers where they are and providing solutions that address their specific contexts—a principle that has guided our entire program. We remain confident that with continued support, The Eye News will gain digital momentum over time.

RFM - Radio Station

The team at RFM, led by Johnathan Mathebula, deserves special recognition for strategically focusing their digital efforts on social media platforms that directly support their core radio broadcasting operations. Their passion for community broadcasting has guided their digital strategy, prioritizing platforms that enhance their primary mission rather than diluting their focus.

This approach exemplifies how media outlets can make strategic decisions about digital transformation that align with their organizational strengths and community priorities—sometimes meaning a narrower digital focus rather than attempting to excel across all possible platforms.

Through this case study, we acknowledge all participants for their dedication and understanding that developing a digital strategy resembles starting a new business—profits and high traffic rarely materialize in the first year. Success comes through applying strategies, learning from setbacks, and maintaining resilience. With the overwhelming response we received from publications across South Africa applying for this project, we remain confident that the digital tide will indeed lift all one day. As we've emphasized throughout this program: Sustainability is "Sustain-the-Ability" to continue being resilient.