



Mapping Threats to the Media in Botswana

Zoom seminar synopsis



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE WEBINAR

Intelwatch convened a regional webinar to present and discuss the findings of its report, *A Democracy at the Crossroads: Mapping the Threats to the Media in Botswana*. The webinar formed part of Intelwatch's wider Southern African research project examining the evolving threats confronting journalists and media institutions across seven countries in the region. Beyond launching the report, the event sought to create a platform for dialogue between researchers, journalists, legal scholars, editors, media organisations and civil society actors to critically assess Botswana's media environment and identify practical measures to strengthen media freedom. The discussion also reflected Intelwatch's broader approach of combining research with advocacy, capacity building and journalist safety initiatives, particularly around digital security, surveillance awareness and newsroom resilience.

Opening the webinar, Intelwatch's Advocacy and Capacity Building Director, Owen Gagare, explained that the organisation was established to strengthen public oversight of state and private intelligence agencies while promoting media freedom and the protection of journalists across Southern Africa. He noted that the Botswana report forms one component of a broader regional initiative examining the legal, political, economic and technological pressures facing the media. Rather than simply documenting violations, the objective of the project was to encourage informed dialogue, identify opportunities for collaboration and support practical interventions capable of improving the safety and independence of journalists.

Intelwatch's Executive Director, Piers Pigou, reinforced this objective by emphasising that the reports were intended to stimulate constructive engagement rather than merely criticise governments or public institutions. He stressed that media freedom should be approached as a shared societal concern requiring collaboration between journalists, researchers, civil society organisations and policymakers. Pigou further highlighted Intelwatch's commitment to producing research that informs advocacy while supporting journalists through training programmes on digital security, surveillance awareness and investigative reporting.

Unlike many regional discussions that focus primarily on direct attacks against journalists, the Botswana seminar explored a broader understanding of media freedom. Participants examined how legislation, surveillance technologies, economic pressures, political discourse, newsroom sustainability and professional standards collectively influence the ability of journalists to operate independently. Throughout the discussion, speakers sought to balance recognition of

Botswana's comparatively open media environment with an honest assessment of emerging structural challenges that threaten press freedom and democratic accountability.

Panellists of the discussion included:

1. **Mmapula Molapong** - Co-author of the report , freelance journalist and researcher
2. **Jeannie Olesitse** - Acting Chairperson of the Botswana Editors Forum
3. **Kabo Ramasia** – Journalist and board member of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Botswana
4. **Prof Tachilisa Badala Balule** - Associate Professor of Law @ University of Botswana

REPORT FINDINGS PRESENTATION

Presenting the report, Mmapula explained that the research sought to examine the contemporary threats confronting journalists in Botswana by analysing the legal, political, technological and economic environment within which media organisations operate. Although Botswana has historically enjoyed a reputation as one of Africa's more stable democracies, the research found growing evidence that media freedom is increasingly being challenged by both longstanding structural problems and newer threats associated with digital technologies and evolving forms of state power.

Rather than portraying Botswana as a country experiencing systematic repression comparable to some of its regional neighbours, the report argues that the country's media environment is at a critical juncture. Democratic institutions continue to provide important protections for freedom of expression, yet journalists increasingly encounter legal uncertainty, surveillance concerns, economic vulnerability and political rhetoric that collectively risk narrowing the space for independent journalism. These pressures, while often less visible than physical violence or arbitrary detention, nevertheless create conditions that encourage caution, undermine investigative reporting and weaken public accountability.

Legal and Regulatory Challenges

One of the report's central findings concerned the continued existence of legislative provisions that potentially restrict media freedom despite constitutional guarantees protecting freedom of expression. Mmapula explained that Botswana's legal framework contains several laws

inherited from earlier political periods that remain capable of limiting journalistic activity, particularly where reporting intersects with matters considered politically sensitive or relating to national security.

Particular attention was devoted to legislation governing sedition, official secrets and criminal defamation, as well as broader concerns regarding statutory regulation of the media. Although these laws are not always aggressively enforced, participants argued that their continued existence creates legal uncertainty capable of influencing editorial decision-making. The report notes that restrictive legislation often functions through its deterrent effect rather than through frequent prosecution, encouraging journalists to exercise greater caution when reporting on politically contentious issues.

The discussion also examined Botswana's evolving framework for media regulation. Participants reflected on previous attempts to establish statutory media regulatory bodies through legislation such as the Media Practitioners Act, with differing opinions emerging regarding the balance between professional accountability and government oversight. While recognising the importance of maintaining high professional standards, the report argues that regulatory mechanisms should preserve editorial independence and avoid creating opportunities for political interference in journalistic work.

Surveillance and Digital Threats

A major finding of the report was that surveillance has become one of the most significant emerging threats confronting journalists in Botswana. Unlike traditional restrictions that rely primarily upon censorship or direct intimidation, modern surveillance technologies create more subtle yet equally consequential risks for investigative journalism.

The report notes growing concern regarding the state's expanding surveillance capabilities, including the acquisition of sophisticated technologies capable of monitoring communications and accessing digital information. Journalists increasingly depend upon encrypted messaging platforms, electronic document storage and digital communication with confidential sources. Consequently, concerns regarding surveillance extend beyond individual privacy to encompass the broader protection of journalistic sources, confidential investigations and whistleblower communications.

Participants observed that uncertainty regarding the extent of state surveillance itself may encourage self-censorship. Journalists who believe that their communications or sources could

be monitored may become reluctant to pursue sensitive investigations or maintain contact with whistleblowers. In this respect, surveillance represents not merely a technological issue but a direct challenge to investigative journalism and public accountability.

The report therefore argues that legal safeguards governing surveillance require continued scrutiny to ensure that legitimate national security objectives remain balanced against constitutional protections for privacy, freedom of expression and press freedom. Participants further emphasised that journalists require greater awareness of digital security practices capable of protecting both themselves and their confidential sources.

Political Environment and Public Trust

Mmapula also examined the relationship between political discourse and media freedom. Although Botswana continues to maintain democratic institutions and relatively open public debate, participants noted increasing tensions between political leaders and sections of the independent media.

The discussion referenced public statements questioning the credibility of journalists and describing substantial portions of media reporting as "fake news." While recognising that media organisations must uphold rigorous professional standards, participants expressed concern that broad political attacks on journalism risk undermining public confidence in independent reporting. Such rhetoric may contribute to an environment in which journalists face increasing hostility while simultaneously weakening the role of the media as an institution of democratic accountability.

Rather than suggesting widespread government censorship, the report argues that these developments illustrate the importance of protecting constructive relationships between public institutions and independent journalism. Democratic societies depend upon vigorous public scrutiny, and criticism of journalism should not evolve into broader attempts to delegitimise the media as a whole.

Economic Sustainability of the Media

Economic sustainability emerged as another major theme of the report. Mmapula explained that many of Botswana's media organisations operate under considerable financial pressure arising from declining advertising revenue, changing media consumption patterns and broader economic challenges affecting the journalism industry globally.

Participants observed that these financial constraints have profound implications for newsroom capacity. Media houses increasingly struggle to retain experienced journalists, editors and investigative reporters, many of whom leave the profession for better-paying positions in government, corporate communications or the private sector. As experienced professionals depart, newsrooms become increasingly dependent upon younger journalists who often have limited mentorship opportunities and fewer institutional resources.

The report argues that economic vulnerability should be understood as a media freedom issue rather than simply a commercial concern. Financial insecurity reduces newsroom independence, limits investigative reporting and increases susceptibility to both political and commercial influence. Sustainable journalism therefore requires not only editorial commitment but also institutional and financial conditions that allow media organisations to operate independently and retain experienced professionals.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Following the presentation of the report, panelists reflected on the findings and discussed how Botswana's media environment has evolved over recent years. Although participants agreed that Botswana continues to enjoy stronger constitutional protections and a more open media environment than several countries in the region, they cautioned against complacency. The discussion highlighted that many of the threats facing journalists today are less visible than direct censorship or violence, instead manifesting through legislation, surveillance, economic pressures, political rhetoric and institutional weaknesses. Collectively, these developments create an increasingly complex environment in which journalists must balance their professional responsibilities with growing legal, financial and technological risks.

A recurring observation throughout the discussion was that threats to media freedom should not be measured solely by the number of journalists arrested or assaulted. Instead, speakers argued that structural pressures—including declining newsroom resources, digital surveillance capabilities and restrictive legislation—can have equally significant consequences by encouraging self-censorship and limiting investigative reporting without necessarily attracting public attention.

Freedom of Expression, Constitutional Protections and Legal Reform

Professor Tachilisa Balule expanded upon many of the legal issues identified in the report by placing Botswana's media environment within a broader constitutional and international human

rights framework. He explained that Botswana possesses relatively strong constitutional guarantees protecting freedom of expression, yet these protections continue to coexist alongside legislation inherited from earlier political periods that permits restrictions upon journalistic activity.

Prof Balule argued that democratic governance requires continual review of legislation to ensure that laws remain consistent with constitutional values and international human rights standards. Although many restrictive provisions are infrequently enforced, their continued existence creates uncertainty for journalists and may discourage robust reporting on politically sensitive subjects. He therefore encouraged ongoing legislative reform aimed at strengthening legal protections for journalists while ensuring that any restrictions upon freedom of expression remain necessary, proportionate and subject to independent judicial oversight.

The discussion also explored the distinction between responsible journalism and government regulation. While recognising that professional accountability remains important, panelists generally agreed that independent self-regulatory mechanisms provide stronger protection for editorial independence than statutory systems controlled or influenced by the state. Maintaining public trust, they argued, depends upon strengthening journalistic ethics without compromising institutional autonomy.

Surveillance, Privacy and Digital Security

One of the webinar's most significant discussions focused on surveillance and the rapidly changing digital environment within which journalism now operates. Professor Balule observed that technological developments have fundamentally transformed both investigative journalism and state surveillance capabilities. While digital technologies have expanded opportunities for communication and information sharing, they have simultaneously increased the vulnerability of journalists and their confidential sources.

Participants expressed concern that journalists increasingly conduct sensitive reporting using mobile phones, cloud-based storage services, email and encrypted messaging applications. Although these technologies facilitate investigative work, they also expose reporters to surveillance, cyber intrusion and unauthorised access to confidential material. Several speakers emphasised that protecting journalistic sources has become considerably more complex in an era characterised by sophisticated digital monitoring capabilities.

The discussion stressed that surveillance should not be understood solely as a technical or cybersecurity issue. Rather, uncertainty regarding the confidentiality of communications directly affects journalistic practice. If journalists fear that confidential conversations or documents may be monitored, they may avoid pursuing sensitive investigations altogether. This chilling effect undermines investigative reporting while reducing the willingness of whistleblowers to share information concerning corruption, abuse of authority or maladministration.

Participants therefore emphasised the growing importance of digital security training for journalists. Developing stronger cybersecurity practices, understanding encrypted communications and improving awareness of digital threats were identified as essential components of contemporary journalism rather than optional technical skills reserved only for investigative reporters.

Economic Sustainability and the Future of Journalism

Economic sustainability emerged repeatedly throughout the panel discussion as one of the most pressing long-term challenges confronting Botswana's media industry. While acknowledging that financial pressures affect media organisations globally, participants argued that economic vulnerability has direct implications for media freedom and democratic accountability.

Jeanette highlighted the difficulties facing news organisations as traditional revenue models continue to decline. Falling advertising income, increased competition from digital platforms and changing audience behaviour have significantly reduced newsroom resources. These financial pressures affect every stage of the journalistic process, limiting opportunities for investigative reporting, reducing editorial capacity and increasing workloads for remaining staff.

Participants also expressed concern regarding the migration of experienced journalists into government communication, public relations and corporate sectors where salaries are considerably higher. This ongoing loss of experienced professionals weakens institutional memory within newsrooms while reducing opportunities for mentoring younger journalists entering the profession.

The discussion emphasised that journalism cannot fulfil its democratic watchdog function without adequate institutional support. Sustainable business models, diversified sources of

revenue and continued investment in professional journalism were therefore presented as essential components of media freedom rather than simply matters of commercial management.

Professional Standards and Public Confidence

Another major theme concerned the relationship between journalistic professionalism and public trust. Participants recognised that independent journalism derives much of its legitimacy from public confidence in the accuracy, fairness and integrity of reporting. Consequently, maintaining high professional standards remains essential both for protecting media credibility and resisting external attempts to justify restrictive regulation.

Panellists argued that journalists must continue strengthening ethical reporting, fact-checking and editorial accountability. At the same time, they cautioned against political narratives portraying isolated reporting errors as evidence that the media as an institution lacks credibility. Such rhetoric risks undermining public confidence in independent journalism while creating opportunities to justify greater political oversight of the media.

The discussion therefore emphasised that defending media freedom requires simultaneous commitment to both editorial independence and professional excellence. Independent journalism and ethical journalism should be understood as complementary rather than competing objectives.

Regional Cooperation and Shared Challenges

Throughout the webinar, speakers repeatedly situated Botswana's experience within the wider Southern African context. Although Botswana continues to experience fewer direct attacks against journalists than several neighbouring countries, participants observed that many of the structural challenges documented in the report increasingly resemble broader regional trends.

Surveillance technologies, digital disinformation, economic pressures, political hostility towards independent journalism and legislative uncertainty have emerged across Southern Africa in different forms. Participants therefore welcomed Intelwatch's regional approach, arguing that comparative research enables countries to learn from one another while identifying common advocacy priorities.

The discussion highlighted the importance of collaboration between journalists, media organisations, academic institutions and civil society organisations throughout the region. Sharing expertise on digital security, legal advocacy, investigative reporting and journalist

safety strengthens collective resilience while promoting common standards for protecting media freedom.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR REFORM

While acknowledging Botswana's comparatively favourable democratic environment, the webinar concluded that preserving media freedom requires proactive reform rather than reliance upon historical democratic traditions.

Participants called for the continued review and reform of legislation affecting freedom of expression to ensure compatibility with constitutional protections and international human rights standards. Restrictive provisions relating to official secrets, sedition and criminal sanctions affecting journalism should be carefully reassessed to prevent unnecessary limitations upon investigative reporting and public-interest journalism.

The discussion further emphasised the importance of establishing robust legal safeguards governing surveillance. As governments increasingly acquire sophisticated digital technologies, participants argued that surveillance powers should remain subject to clear legal frameworks, judicial oversight and effective accountability mechanisms. Protecting confidential journalistic communications was identified as essential for safeguarding investigative journalism and maintaining public confidence in the media.

Economic sustainability likewise emerged as a central priority. Participants encouraged greater investment in independent journalism, stronger support for investigative reporting and the development of diversified funding models capable of reducing financial vulnerability. Strengthening the economic resilience of media organisations would improve editorial independence while enhancing the capacity of journalists to undertake long-term public-interest investigations.

The panel also recommended expanding digital security training across the journalism profession. Cybersecurity awareness, encrypted communication, secure information storage and digital risk assessment should become routine elements of journalistic practice as media organisations increasingly operate within technologically complex environments.

Finally, speakers emphasised the importance of strengthening collaboration between journalists, editors, legal experts, academic institutions and civil society organisations. Protecting media freedom requires collective action capable of responding effectively to both existing challenges and emerging threats associated with rapidly evolving technologies.

Broader Significance of the Report

Throughout the webinar, participants emphasised that the *Mapping the Threats to the Media in Botswana* report should not be interpreted simply as a catalogue of challenges facing journalists. Rather, it represents an assessment of the broader democratic environment within which journalism operates and the structural conditions that either enable or constrain the media's ability to fulfil its public watchdog function. Speakers argued that protecting media freedom is ultimately inseparable from protecting democratic governance, transparency and the public's right to access reliable information.

One of the report's central conclusions is that Botswana finds itself at a pivotal moment. While the country continues to enjoy a comparatively favourable reputation for democratic governance and freedom of expression, participants cautioned that these achievements should not be taken for granted. Democracies do not remain resilient through constitutional guarantees alone; they require continual vigilance, institutional accountability and a willingness to adapt legal and regulatory frameworks to address emerging challenges.

The discussion demonstrated that the threats confronting journalism are becoming increasingly sophisticated. Whereas media freedom has historically been threatened through overt censorship, arrests or physical attacks on journalists, contemporary challenges increasingly emerge through less visible mechanisms. Expanding surveillance capabilities, legal uncertainty, declining newsroom resources, online disinformation, economic instability and political rhetoric all influence the environment within which journalists operate. Individually these pressures may appear manageable, but collectively they create conditions that discourage investigative reporting and encourage self-censorship.

Participants also reflected on the changing nature of journalism itself. The rapid expansion of digital media has created unprecedented opportunities for public engagement, information sharing and investigative reporting. At the same time, however, it has intensified financial pressures on traditional news organisations while exposing journalists to new forms of cyber threats, digital surveillance and online harassment. The report therefore argues that safeguarding media freedom today requires responses extending beyond traditional legal reform to include digital security, technological literacy and institutional resilience.

A further theme emerging from the discussion was the importance of public confidence in journalism. Speakers noted that media freedom cannot be sustained without public trust in the professionalism, accuracy and ethical standards of journalists. This places a shared

responsibility upon media organisations to uphold rigorous editorial standards while resisting external attempts to undermine independent journalism through misinformation or politically motivated attacks on media credibility. Strengthening professionalism and defending editorial independence were therefore presented as mutually reinforcing objectives.

The regional dimension of Intelwatch's research was also repeatedly emphasised. Participants welcomed the opportunity to compare Botswana's experience with developments elsewhere in Southern Africa, noting that many of the structural pressures affecting Botswana—including surveillance, economic challenges and digital threats—are increasingly visible across the region. Comparative research enables policymakers, journalists and civil society organisations to identify common trends, exchange good practices and strengthen collaborative advocacy for media freedom throughout Southern Africa.

Ultimately, the report presents Botswana as neither a country experiencing severe media repression nor one entirely free from concern. Instead, it portrays a democratic system facing a gradual evolution of threats that require careful monitoring and proactive reform. By identifying these emerging pressures before they become deeply entrenched, the report seeks to contribute to a broader conversation about preserving democratic institutions and strengthening the conditions necessary for independent journalism to flourish.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

In concluding the webinar, participants reiterated that Botswana's democratic reputation provides an important foundation upon which stronger protections for media freedom can continue to be built. However, they stressed that maintaining this position requires sustained commitment from government institutions, journalists, civil society organisations, academic institutions and the broader public. Protecting media freedom is not solely the responsibility of journalists but a shared democratic obligation affecting every citizen's right to receive accurate, independent and diverse information.

The discussion reinforced the importance of adopting a holistic understanding of media freedom. Restrictive legislation, surveillance technologies, financial instability, political hostility towards independent journalism and declining newsroom capacity should not be viewed as isolated concerns. Rather, they form interconnected components of a broader environment that shapes journalistic practice and influences the ability of the media to perform its democratic watchdog role effectively.

Participants agreed that strengthening Botswana's media environment requires action across multiple fronts. Legislative reform should ensure that existing laws remain consistent with constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. Surveillance frameworks should incorporate clear safeguards protecting journalistic communications and confidential sources. Media organisations should continue investing in professional standards, ethical journalism and digital security, while broader efforts should be made to improve the long-term financial sustainability of independent news organisations.

The webinar also highlighted the value of ongoing dialogue between researchers, journalists, policymakers and civil society. The discussions demonstrated that many of the challenges identified in the report are neither unique to Botswana nor insurmountable. Through collaboration, comparative research and continued advocacy, participants expressed confidence that practical solutions can be developed to strengthen media freedom while reinforcing democratic accountability.

Concluding the event, Intelwatch reaffirmed its commitment to supporting journalists through research, advocacy and capacity-building initiatives across Southern Africa. The Botswana report forms part of a wider regional effort to document the evolving threats facing the media while promoting informed discussion about the reforms necessary to protect press freedom in an increasingly complex political and technological environment.

The webinar therefore served not only as the launch of the *Mapping the Threats to the Media in Botswana* report but also as an important platform for reflection on the future of journalism in one of Africa's longest-standing democracies. By bringing together legal scholars, journalists, editors and media advocates, the discussion underscored that preserving media freedom requires continuous engagement, institutional resilience and collective commitment to the democratic principles of transparency, accountability and freedom of expression. Through documenting emerging risks while identifying opportunities for reform, the report provides an evidence-based foundation upon which future advocacy, policy development and regional cooperation can continue to strengthen the media landscape in Botswana.