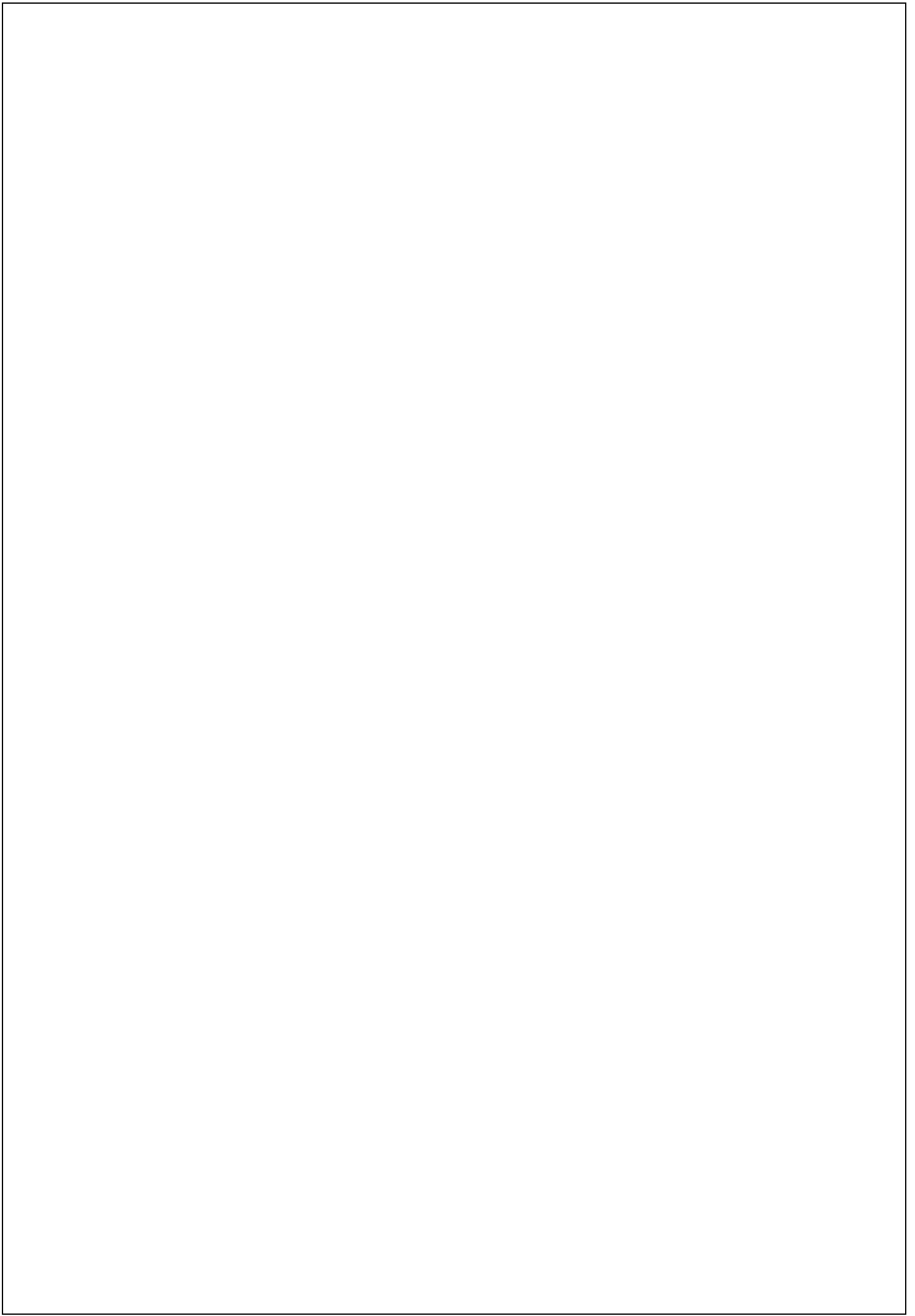




Mapping Threats to the Media in Zimbabwe

Zoom seminar synopsis



INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE WEBINAR

The webinar formed part of Intelwatch's regional Southern Africa initiative examining the evolving threats confronting journalists and media organisations across the region. As the fourth seminar in the series, following discussions on Botswana, Mozambique and South Africa, the event centred on the findings of the report *Mapping Threats to the Media in Zimbabwe*, co-authored by journalists Mary Taruvinga and Owen Gagare. The report explored the increasingly restrictive environment in which Zimbabwean journalists operate, documenting how legal, political, economic and technological pressures have combined to undermine independent journalism and restrict freedom of expression.

Opening the webinar, Intelwatch's Advocacy and Capacity building Director Owen Gagare explained that the report formed part of a broader regional effort to understand how threats to media freedom are evolving across Southern Africa. While each country examined within the project experiences distinct challenges, the Zimbabwe report demonstrated how repression has become increasingly sophisticated, relying less on overt censorship and more on the strategic use of legislation, judicial processes, digital surveillance, economic hardship and political influence to discourage independent reporting. Rather than functioning independently, these pressures reinforce one another, creating an environment in which journalists increasingly face legal uncertainty, financial insecurity and personal risk simply for carrying out their professional responsibilities.

Throughout the discussion, panellists and participants emphasised that threats to media freedom in Zimbabwe can no longer be understood solely through isolated arrests or individual incidents of intimidation. Instead, they argued that the country has developed a sophisticated system of repression in which legislation, policing, judicial processes, surveillance technologies, economic deprivation and political pressure collectively discourage critical reporting. This environment has produced widespread self-censorship, weakened investigative journalism and reduced public access to independent information, ultimately affecting democratic accountability far beyond the media sector itself.

Panellists of the discussion included:

1. **Mary Taruvinga** - co-author of the report
2. **Mary Mundeya** - Managing Editor of She Corresponds Africa
3. **Leopold Munhende** - President of Young Journalists Association of Zimbabwe

4. **Nigel Nyamutumbu** - National Coordinator of Media Alliance of Zimbabwe
5. **Njabulo Ncube** - National Coordinator of Zimbabwe National Editors Forum
6. **Blessed Mhlanga** - Digital Editor of Alpha Media Holdings

REPORT FINDINGS PRESENTATION

Presenting the report, Mary Taruvinga explained that Zimbabwe's media environment has undergone a significant transformation over recent years. While earlier periods were characterised by direct censorship and overt restrictions on the press, contemporary threats increasingly emerge through legal mechanisms, institutional practices and economic pressures that make journalism progressively more difficult without necessarily banning independent reporting outright. The report argued that these interconnected pressures have produced an environment in which journalists must continuously assess not only the public interest value of a story but also the legal, financial and personal risks associated with publishing it.

A central finding of the report was that Zimbabwe's system of media repression relies upon multiple reinforcing mechanisms rather than a single restrictive law or institution. Weaponised legislation, prolonged pretrial detention, judicial complicity, digital surveillance, political interference in regulatory bodies, economic hardship and coordinated intimidation collectively shape the environment within which journalists operate. Participants therefore stressed that meaningful reform requires addressing these interconnected challenges rather than focusing exclusively on isolated legislative amendments.

Legal and Regulatory Challenges

The report identified Zimbabwe's legislative framework as one of the principal mechanisms through which independent journalism is constrained. Mary acknowledged that many contemporary laws are presented as necessary responses to cybersecurity, broadcasting regulation or national security concerns. However, argued that their implementation frequently extends beyond legitimate regulatory objectives and instead creates opportunities to monitor journalists, criminalise reporting and discourage investigative journalism.

Particular attention was devoted to the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act (2025), which significantly expanded executive influence over broadcasting regulation. The legislation grants the President authority to appoint members of the Broadcasting Authority board, extends

regulatory oversight to aspects of online content and requires broadcasters to carry mandatory government programming. The researchers argued that these provisions increase political influence over licensing decisions and expand the state's capacity to shape the broader information environment, particularly as journalism increasingly moves onto digital platforms.

The discussion also examined the Cyber and Data Protection Act (2021), which the researchers identified as a growing concern for investigative journalists. Although the legislation addresses legitimate cybersecurity and data protection issues, speakers argued that its surveillance provisions permit authorities to monitor digital communications, require internet service providers to retain user data and facilitate access to electronic information during investigations. Journalists expressed concern that these powers may be used to identify confidential sources, investigate critical reporting and discourage whistleblowers from sharing information concerning corruption or abuse of power.

Closely related concerns were raised regarding the Interception of Communications Act, which authorises the interception of telephone calls, emails and internet communications while requiring telecommunications providers to cooperate with state authorities. Participants emphasised that investigative journalism depends fundamentally upon the confidentiality of communications between journalists and their sources. Expanding interception powers therefore poses direct risks to source protection while contributing to broader self-censorship among reporters investigating politically sensitive issues. The report further noted that provisions contained within the Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act, including offences relating to falsehoods and criminal defamation, have effectively reintroduced legal restrictions previously struck down by the Constitutional Court. Collectively, these measures create legal uncertainty that encourages caution among journalists and editors when reporting on matters involving politically influential individuals or institutions.

Arrest, Detention and Judicial Complicity

One of the report's most significant findings concerned the increasing use of arrest and prolonged pretrial detention as instruments of intimidation. Participants argued that contemporary repression in Zimbabwe often relies less upon successful criminal prosecutions than upon the process of arrest itself. Journalists may spend weeks or months in detention before their cases are resolved, imposing severe financial, psychological and professional consequences irrespective of eventual court outcomes.

The report documented several prominent examples illustrating this pattern. Investigative journalist Hopewell Chin'ono was repeatedly arrested following his reporting on corruption and his social media commentary, while Faith Zaba, editor of the *Zimbabwe Independent*, faced criminal proceedings after publishing satirical commentary concerning intimidation of journalists. Participants also recalled the continuing disappearance of journalist and activist Itai Dzamara, who was abducted in 2015 after publicly criticising government failures and whose whereabouts remain unknown. These cases collectively illustrate how journalists continue to face intimidation through arrests, legal proceedings and enforced disappearances, contributing to a broader climate of fear within the profession.

Particular attention was devoted to the experience of journalist Blessed Mhlanga, whose testimony became one of the defining features of the webinar. Mhlanga described being arrested after broadcasting a press conference involving opposition politician Job Sikhala despite not personally operating the broadcasting platform concerned. Although employed as a journalist rather than a broadcaster, he spent more than seventy days in pretrial detention while legal proceedings continued. Participants argued that his case demonstrated how criminal processes themselves have become instruments of punishment, with prolonged detention imposing significant personal and professional costs before any determination of guilt has been made.

Mhlanga further reflected on the severe consequences of his imprisonment, describing deteriorating physical health, psychological trauma and continuing security concerns following his release. He explained that he subsequently left Zimbabwe after medical professionals advised that returning would expose him to further trauma and ongoing threats. Beyond the immediate impact upon his own wellbeing, participants argued that his experience illustrates the broader chilling effect created by pretrial detention. When journalists witness colleagues imprisoned for extended periods before trial, many become reluctant to pursue investigations or interview politically sensitive figures, thereby limiting the diversity of voices represented within public debate.

Surveillance, Cybersecurity and Digital Threats

A recurring theme throughout both the report and the subsequent panel discussion was the growing role of digital surveillance in constraining independent journalism. Participants argued that while surveillance has long been associated with Zimbabwe's security apparatus, technological developments have significantly expanded the state's capacity to monitor

communications, identify confidential sources and restrict the free flow of information. As journalism has increasingly shifted onto digital platforms, reporters have become more vulnerable to electronic monitoring, cyber intrusions and online intimidation.

The report explained that legislation governing electronic communications has created an environment in which journalists increasingly question whether their communications with confidential sources remain secure. Participants noted that investigative reporting depends fundamentally upon trust between journalists and whistleblowers. Where individuals fear that telephone calls, emails or encrypted messaging applications may be intercepted, they become considerably less willing to disclose information concerning corruption, abuse of office or human rights violations. The resulting decline in confidential sources weakens investigative journalism while limiting the public's access to information that serves the broader public interest.

The researchers and participants further observed that surveillance now extends beyond state monitoring alone. Journalists also face cyber threats from unknown actors seeking to gain unauthorised access to electronic devices, compromise digital communications or intimidate reporters through hacking and online abuse. As a result, digital security has become an increasingly important component of journalist safety. Participants argued that media organisations should invest more substantially in cybersecurity training, encrypted communications, secure storage of sensitive information and broader digital literacy programmes to ensure that journalists are better equipped to protect themselves and their sources.

The discussion also explored the wider psychological effects of surveillance. Even where journalists cannot prove that their communications are being monitored, uncertainty itself creates a powerful chilling effect. Reporters may avoid contacting certain sources, postpone sensitive investigations or choose not to pursue controversial stories because they cannot be confident that their communications remain confidential. Participants argued that this atmosphere of uncertainty contributes directly to self-censorship, allowing surveillance to undermine investigative journalism without requiring overt state intervention.

Online Harassment and Gender-Based Threats

The report also identified online harassment as one of the fastest-growing threats confronting Zimbabwean journalists. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for independent reporting and public engagement, they have simultaneously created new avenues through

which journalists are subjected to intimidation, coordinated abuse and reputational attacks. Participants noted that online harassment frequently accompanies investigative reporting on politically sensitive issues, with journalists becoming the targets of coordinated campaigns designed to undermine both their professional credibility and their personal wellbeing.

Particular concern was expressed regarding the experiences of women journalists, who often encounter forms of abuse that differ significantly from those directed at their male colleagues. Participants observed that female reporters are routinely subjected to misogynistic insults, sexual harassment, threats of violence and coordinated online attacks questioning their competence, morality or legitimacy as journalists. Such abuse extends well beyond ordinary criticism of journalistic work and instead seeks to discourage women from participating fully in public debate.

Speakers argued that gender-based harassment remains insufficiently recognised within broader discussions concerning journalist safety. While physical attacks and arrests often receive greater public attention, sustained online abuse may have equally significant psychological and professional consequences. Many women journalists consequently alter their online presence, reduce public engagement or avoid reporting on controversial political issues altogether in order to minimise the risk of harassment.

Participants therefore emphasised that journalist protection initiatives must explicitly incorporate gender-sensitive approaches. Strengthening digital security, providing psychological support, establishing institutional reporting mechanisms and promoting newsroom policies addressing online abuse were all identified as important measures capable of improving the working environment for women journalists while strengthening the media sector as a whole.

Economic Sustainability and Political Capture

Alongside legal and technological challenges, the report examined the profound economic pressures affecting Zimbabwe's media landscape. Participants observed that prolonged economic instability has significantly weakened the financial sustainability of independent journalism, reducing newsroom resources while increasing the vulnerability of journalists to political and commercial influence.

The report noted that many independent media organisations operate under severe financial constraints, limiting their capacity to undertake long-term investigative reporting or provide

journalists with adequate legal, technological and safety support. Declining advertising revenues, economic uncertainty and broader financial instability have made it increasingly difficult for news organisations to maintain experienced reporting teams while investing in investigative journalism requiring substantial time and resources.

Participants further argued that financial vulnerability contributes directly to political capture. Media organisations dependent upon politically connected advertisers, government contracts or other forms of external financial support may face subtle pressure to avoid critical reporting concerning influential political or economic actors. Although these pressures do not necessarily involve direct censorship, they nevertheless shape editorial priorities while encouraging greater caution when reporting on politically sensitive subjects.

The discussion also highlighted the increasingly difficult circumstances confronting freelance journalists and community media practitioners. Operating with limited institutional support, these journalists often face the same legal and security risks as reporters employed by larger organisations while lacking access to legal representation, digital security training or financial assistance when confronted with litigation or arrest. Participants therefore argued that strengthening media freedom requires recognising economic sustainability as an essential component of journalistic independence rather than merely a commercial concern.

PANEL DISCUSSION

Following the presentation of the report, panellists reflected on the broader implications of the findings while drawing upon their own professional experiences to illustrate the realities confronting journalists in Zimbabwe. Although each participant approached the discussion from a different perspective, there was broad agreement that the country's media environment has become increasingly restrictive through the cumulative interaction of legal, political, economic and technological pressures.

Rather than relying exclusively on overt censorship, speakers argued that contemporary repression increasingly operates through institutional processes that make journalism progressively more difficult without necessarily prohibiting it outright. Arrests, prolonged detention, burdensome legal proceedings, surveillance, financial insecurity and political intimidation collectively create an environment in which journalists must constantly weigh the personal consequences of pursuing investigations into matters of public interest.

Judicial Repression and the Experience of Journalists

A central focus of the discussion was the growing use of judicial processes as instruments of intimidation. Panelists argued that contemporary repression often depends less upon securing criminal convictions than upon exposing journalists to lengthy legal proceedings, repeated court appearances and prolonged periods of detention before trial.

Blessed Mhlanga's testimony provided one of the clearest illustrations of this phenomenon. Reflecting on his imprisonment, he described the profound physical, emotional and psychological consequences of spending more than two months in detention while awaiting legal proceedings. Participants observed that his case demonstrates how legal processes themselves have become punitive, irrespective of the eventual outcome of criminal charges. The burden imposed by arrest, detention and prolonged uncertainty frequently extends well beyond the courtroom, affecting journalists' careers, family lives and mental health while simultaneously discouraging colleagues from undertaking similarly sensitive reporting.

Several speakers noted that such experiences contribute significantly to self-censorship throughout Zimbabwe's media sector. When journalists witness colleagues repeatedly arrested or detained despite ultimately facing weak legal cases, many inevitably begin avoiding politically controversial stories or limiting engagement with opposition figures, civil society organisations and whistleblowers. Participants therefore argued that judicial harassment has become one of the most effective mechanisms through which independent journalism is constrained without resorting to formal censorship.

Strengthening Advocacy and Collective Action

Beyond documenting the immediate threats confronting journalists, the panel reflected extensively on the broader advocacy landscape surrounding media freedom in Zimbabwe. Participants agreed that while numerous organisations continue to support journalists through legal assistance, training and advocacy, significant gaps remain in the coordination and sustainability of these efforts. Media freedom organisations frequently respond effectively to individual incidents of arrest or harassment, but speakers argued that greater emphasis should be placed on long-term structural reform capable of preventing such violations from occurring in the first place.

Nigel observed that advocacy should extend beyond responding to crises and instead focus on strengthening institutional safeguards capable of protecting journalists before violations occur.

This includes continued engagement with Parliament, the judiciary, regulatory authorities and policymakers responsible for drafting and implementing legislation affecting media freedom. Participants argued that legal reform alone would be insufficient unless accompanied by meaningful institutional commitment to respecting constitutional protections for freedom of expression and media independence.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of building stronger relationships between journalists, civil society organisations, legal practitioners and academic institutions. Participants noted that attacks against journalists often occur alongside broader restrictions on civic space affecting human rights defenders, community activists and researchers. As a result, protecting media freedom requires collaborative advocacy capable of addressing wider democratic challenges rather than focusing exclusively on the journalism profession.

Several speakers further emphasised the importance of regional cooperation. Intelwatch's comparative Southern African project was welcomed as an important platform through which journalists and media organisations can exchange experiences, identify emerging regional trends and develop coordinated responses to shared challenges such as surveillance, shrinking civic space, strategic litigation and digital insecurity. Participants argued that many of the threats documented in Zimbabwe increasingly resemble developments elsewhere in the region, making regional collaboration both timely and necessary.

The Future of Journalism in Zimbabwe

The panel concluded by reflecting on the resilience demonstrated by Zimbabwean journalists despite the increasingly restrictive conditions under which they operate. Participants acknowledged that independent journalism continues to face significant legal, financial and political obstacles, yet investigative reporters, editors and community media practitioners remain committed to exposing corruption, documenting human rights abuses and providing citizens with reliable information.

Speakers noted that younger journalists entering the profession now face a substantially different operating environment from previous generations. They must simultaneously navigate restrictive legislation, digital surveillance, online harassment, economic insecurity and heightened political polarisation while adapting to rapidly evolving technologies and changing patterns of news consumption. These realities underscore the need for journalism training programmes that incorporate not only reporting skills but also digital security, legal literacy, risk assessment and professional resilience.

Participants nevertheless expressed cautious optimism regarding the future of Zimbabwean journalism. They argued that independent media continues to demonstrate remarkable adaptability despite sustained pressure, supported by strong professional networks, civil society partnerships and increasing regional cooperation. Maintaining this resilience, however, will require continued investment in journalist safety, institutional independence and legal reform.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND AREAS FOR REFORM

As the webinar drew to a close, participants identified several practical measures capable of strengthening media freedom and improving the operating environment for journalists in Zimbabwe. While recognising the country's complex political and institutional landscape, speakers agreed that meaningful progress remains possible through coordinated reforms involving government, the judiciary, media organisations and civil society.

A primary recommendation concerned comprehensive legislative reform. Participants called for existing laws affecting journalism—including legislation governing broadcasting, cybercrime, surveillance and criminal offences relating to expression—to be reviewed and implemented in a manner consistent with Zimbabwe's constitutional protections for freedom of expression and media freedom. Particular emphasis was placed on ensuring that legislation cannot be used to criminalise investigative journalism or undermine the confidentiality of journalistic sources.

The discussion also highlighted the urgent need to address the misuse of arrest and prolonged pretrial detention. Participants argued that journalists should not be subjected to extended periods of detention for carrying out legitimate professional activities, particularly where criminal proceedings ultimately fail to establish wrongdoing. Strengthening judicial independence, ensuring timely access to bail and preventing the abuse of criminal procedures were identified as essential reforms capable of reducing the chilling effect currently experienced throughout the media sector.

Digital security emerged as another major priority. Participants recommended expanding training programmes focusing on cybersecurity, encrypted communications, secure data management and surveillance awareness to enable journalists to protect both themselves and their confidential sources. As reporting increasingly depends upon digital technologies, strengthening technological resilience was viewed as indispensable for safeguarding investigative journalism.

The panel further encouraged greater investment in the financial sustainability of independent media organisations. Strengthening newsroom capacity, supporting investigative reporting, expanding legal assistance mechanisms and improving access to professional development opportunities would enhance the resilience of journalists operating under increasingly difficult economic conditions.

Finally, participants called for stronger collaboration between journalists, media associations, legal practitioners, academic institutions and civil society organisations. Such partnerships, they argued, are essential for advancing advocacy, monitoring violations against journalists and promoting reforms that strengthen both media freedom and the broader democratic environment.

BROADER SIGNIFICANCE OF THE REPORT

Throughout the webinar, participants repeatedly stressed that the *Mapping Threats to the Media in Zimbabwe* report extends beyond documenting violations against journalists. Rather, it provides a comprehensive assessment of the broader democratic conditions shaping the practice of journalism and the public's access to independent information. The report demonstrates that restrictions affecting journalists inevitably affect democratic accountability by limiting scrutiny of political authority, reducing government transparency and weakening citizens' ability to participate meaningfully in public life.

One of the report's most significant contributions lies in its emphasis on understanding threats to media freedom as interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Participants observed that Zimbabwe's contemporary media environment cannot be explained solely through restrictive legislation or isolated arrests. Instead, legal uncertainty, surveillance, judicial intimidation, economic hardship, political interference and online harassment combine to produce an increasingly restrictive operating environment in which journalists face multiple overlapping risks.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of recognising journalism as part of a wider civic ecosystem. Journalists, human rights defenders, lawyers, researchers and civil society organisations frequently confront similar forms of intimidation because each contributes to public accountability. Participants therefore argued that shrinking civic space should be understood as a broader democratic challenge affecting multiple sectors rather than a problem confined to the media alone.

Another key finding concerned the evolving nature of authoritarian control. Rather than relying exclusively on overt censorship, contemporary restrictions increasingly operate through administrative procedures, legal mechanisms and technological capabilities that make independent journalism progressively more difficult while maintaining the appearance of formal constitutional protections. This evolution, participants argued, requires equally sophisticated responses encompassing legal reform, institutional accountability, digital security and sustained advocacy.

The report further demonstrates the value of comparative regional research. By examining Zimbabwe alongside Botswana, Mozambique, South Africa and other Southern African countries, Intelwatch's regional project reveals both shared trends and country-specific dynamics affecting media freedom. Participants observed that while Zimbabwe's challenges remain particularly acute, issues such as surveillance, strategic litigation, economic pressures and shrinking civic space increasingly resonate across the region, reinforcing the importance of continued regional cooperation and knowledge-sharing.

Ultimately, the report concludes that although Zimbabwe's journalists continue to operate within one of the region's most restrictive media environments, they also remain central to promoting transparency, exposing corruption and defending democratic accountability. Their resilience underscores both the importance of independent journalism and the continuing need for reforms capable of strengthening institutional protections for freedom of expression.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

The webinar concluded with a shared recognition that safeguarding media freedom in Zimbabwe requires sustained commitment from journalists, policymakers, civil society organisations, regional institutions and the international community. Participants agreed that while constitutional guarantees provide an important legal foundation, these protections must be matched by meaningful institutional reforms, judicial independence and practical measures that enable journalists to work without fear of arrest, surveillance or intimidation.

Speakers reiterated that the challenges confronting Zimbabwean journalists cannot be addressed through isolated interventions alone. Strengthening media freedom requires a comprehensive approach encompassing legislative reform, protection of confidential sources, safeguards against surveillance, judicial accountability, improved economic sustainability for independent media and stronger mechanisms to combat both physical and digital harassment.

Each of these elements reinforces the others, making coordinated action essential for creating an enabling environment for journalism.

Participants also emphasised the importance of professional solidarity and regional collaboration. Partnerships between journalists, editors, legal practitioners, media freedom organisations and academic institutions were identified as essential for strengthening advocacy, supporting journalists facing intimidation and sharing practical strategies for responding to emerging threats. Intelwatch's regional seminar series was recognised as an important contribution to this collaborative effort by documenting threats systematically while creating platforms for dialogue across Southern Africa.

The *Mapping Threats to the Media in Zimbabwe* report therefore serves as both a detailed assessment of the country's evolving media landscape and a call for sustained action to protect freedom of expression. By documenting the legal, political, economic and technological pressures confronting journalists while encouraging informed dialogue among researchers, practitioners and policymakers, the report contributes to broader regional efforts to strengthen democratic governance through the protection of independent media. Like the reports on Botswana, Mozambique and South Africa, it demonstrates that safeguarding journalism ultimately means safeguarding the public's right to access independent, accurate and accountable information.