

Safeguarding New Social Media Platforms: A WhatsApp Newspaper that Meets Readers Where They Are

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The entire set of Global Insights essays can be found [here](#).

Journalism is a bulwark against disinformation's dangerous impact and other threats to the integrity of the information space. Direct messaging apps can create trusted relationships with readers by providing easily accessible, quality journalism that is insulated from media regulations and local pressures. "The Continent" is one example of an Africa- and WhatsApp-based newspaper that provides its readers with trusted information and allows them to question manipulation as well as engage in the democratic process of their country.

Last year, the World Health Organization warned of an "infodemic," referring to an excessive amount of disinformation that "spreads faster and more easily than the virus" on social media platforms.¹ At the same time, direct messaging platforms like WhatsApp, WeChat, Signal, and Telegram continued to grow. With hard lockdowns around the world, these applications became the primary outlets through which people accessed and shared information. But these new platforms are not immune to manipulation. Civil society organizations must work to protect them from misuse.

The Continent, where I serve as editorial director, is an Africa-based newspaper published on encrypted messaging platforms that provides accessible, quality journalism for people to read and share freely. Established in the early Spring of 2020, its 15,000 subscribers in 105 countries have a free, alternative source of news that meets them where they are: online and on social media channels.² The goal is to provide readers with truthful reporting to share—instead of mis- and disinformation—in a short and digestible format.

Eschewing traditional print or online models, *The Continent* uses encrypted chat platforms, primarily WhatsApp, to disseminate its content. Thanks to Facebook's "free basics" program, an initiative that allowed people with select cellular data providers to access the company's apps for free, WhatsApp is ubiquitous across sub-Saharan Africa³ and is the principal means by which readers access the internet.⁴ People may also subscribe to *The Continent* by email and on Signal or Telegram. The newspaper can be shared easily, as each edition of *The Continent* is a small (five megabyte) PDF file formatted specifically for smartphones.

This choice of distribution model is new, but it is one that media outlets are adopting more regularly. Though major print journalism outlets have developed their online presence with websites and dedicated news apps, they have tended to only publish their online content on major social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and not devote their formats to these or emerging platforms exclusively. Television broadcasters have enjoyed more success in doing so, thanks to their more visual nature—the Brazilian *Jornal da Record's* TikTok account being one successful example.⁵

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News is increasingly disseminated through online channels and newsroom apps in messaging apps where readers can access content through a curated news aggregator that pulls content from multiple different sources, rather than individuals going to specific news sites.⁶

This model is growing in popularity, given WhatsApp, WeChat, and other chat applications' popularity around the world. At present, WeChat dominates this space among global users, because of its China-heavy user base. Models that allow readers to interact with a chatbot to access information, especially on messaging platforms, offers a promising alternative for those who only possess limited internet or data access. Loading a website or social media feed that many other platforms require ultimately uses a great deal of data. Due to high data costs,⁷ many readers prefer sharing links and news on WhatsApp or other chat platforms on their phones. Bot-based models are oriented toward this preference.

For example, Kenya's Standard Group, which has been selected to participate in this year's Google News Initiative, plans to employ company-run bot accounts for both distribution and subscription management efforts. On a subscription basis, users can receive more heavily curated news content via Standard Group's WhatsApp bot.⁸

But basing your business on someone else's algorithm and building a product that is formatted for their platform, leaves it vulnerable to system tweaks or undue influence that can undermine the dissemination of information and make it difficult to access.⁹

Building Trusting Relationships with Readers

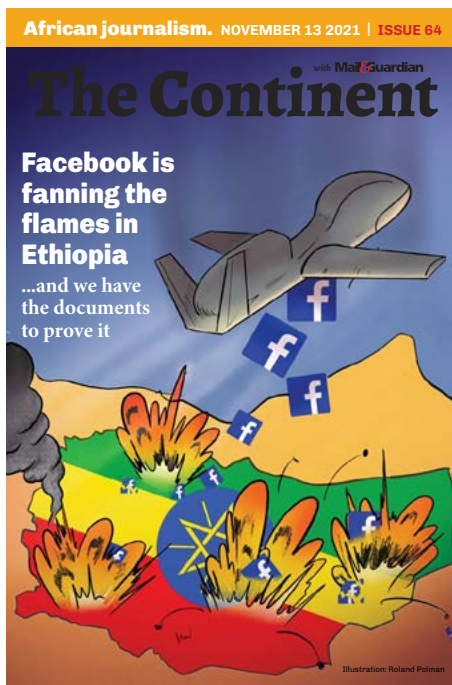
The Continent overcomes this challenge by sending newspapers to people individually, instead of en masse or through bots. Then, subscribers manually forward news items to other readers in PDFs that can be read on any platform. This distribution model nurtures a more personal and responsive environment. It also establishes a closer, more trusting relationship between readers and *The Continent's* staff.

That relationship is key to the distribution model. People tend to share and receive information from people they know, and they tend to value that information more when they know the source. Information that is disseminated among a trusted community or network grants it a psychological stamp of pre-approval, even when that information is wrong.

The Continent engenders a similar community of trust among its readers, but with unbiased, fact-based reporting instead. Along with providing quality journalism free of charge, *The Continent* maintains direct links to its consumers.

The immediate relationship between readers and *Continent* staff underscores their close, shared relationship and it gives readers the sense that they are included in the publication's operations. Readers use these close-knit social channels to debate issues such as the paper's weekly quiz. A letters page has been added to the newspaper to carry some audience responses to articles. *The Continent* is also quick to acknowledge any editorial failings or necessary corrections publicly. Building trust in each relationship is critical.

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The Continent—by virtue of its format and platform for delivery—is easily shareable and able to debunk disinformation and provide independent voices in closed messaging systems like WhatsApp.

Readers are also actively involved in the business future of the newspaper. In an August 2021 survey, *The Continent* asked its consumers directly what they thought about a large bank taking out advertisements in the newspaper to help fund its operations. Many gave thoughtful, nuanced responses,¹⁰ and over 80% of respondents supported the proposal, encouraging the newsroom to proceed with this plan.

Through the cultivation of this relationship between readers and the publication, *The Continent's* readership community becomes invested in the outlet's success. Crucially, it also gives people more incentive to share each edition.

The newspaper's staff encourages readers to share each PDF edition widely to ensure that the focus remains on people who want to read, rather than on large readership numbers.

A December 2020 reader survey showed that a third of readers didn't share news content; a third shared it on occasion; and a third shared it frequently—up to nine times and often with larger groups. This information sharing occurs across numerous apps. Some forward it on WhatsApp; others download the PDF; and some post it on intra-company Slack channels. In this manner, *The Continent* encourages the formation of an information network open to anyone who wishes to access its reporting.

Becoming a Counterweight to Disinformation

By tapping into the same social dynamics that make disinformation so difficult to dislodge, *The Continent* is able to amplify its message and reporting. As a result, it becomes a strong counterweight to “viral” disinformation.

Other outlets in Africa have used this model successfully. For example, Zimbabwe's 263 Chat, a publication that inspired *The Continent*, has a daily PDF publication that it sends to its over fifty-thousand subscribers, and it supports itself by selling advertising. In this case, digital media outlets' low publication costs provide them a great advantage over their print peers. Journalism across Africa is dominated, like in the rest of the world, by only a few major media firms. This system triggers a vicious cycle of decreasing circulation and readership among competitors. The subsequent loss of profit causes staffing cuts and lower quality journalism, stifling smaller, independent media.¹¹ The economic impact of COVID-19 further worsened this trend.¹²

The Continent is fortunate in that it can provide journalism at no cost to its readers because its business model is based on funding from numerous sources. Yet funding for independent news media is fraught with challenges and it, too, must be vigilant. It is critical that funders are not in a position to skew journalistic priorities or exert undue influence.

The Continent has received funding from several external grant-making organizations, including the MOTT Foundation, Internews, and the National Endowment for Democracy. *The Continent* is also developing other income streams to better insulate itself from the current, challenging information environment. These funding agreements show that there is commercial value placed on the audience that *The Continent* attracts. There are also options being explored for readers to support the publication's journalism, without charging for access.

Protections from Media Restrictions and Local Pressures

Publications like *The Continent* also face challenges from government legislation that restricts media freedoms—especially in the context of COVID-19.¹³ The International Press Institute warned at the onset of the pandemic that governments were “already using the crisis as a blank check to establish methods of silencing independent media that harm the flow of badly needed information now and that may outlive the pandemic.”¹⁴

Furthermore, potential government action against chat platform encryption—in name of law enforcement or security—may present another challenge for independent media. WhatsApp's encryption means neither government agencies nor other external entities can intercept or block the release of any edition.

Thus, *The Continent* is well insulated from local political changes and pressures. A potentially controversial investigation on COVID-19 in Tanzania, translated into kiSwahili (the most widely spoken language in that country), revealed the extent to which the government peddled misinformation about the pandemic.¹⁵ Opposition leader Zitto Kabwe told *The Continent* that its coverage changed the terms of the debate and encouraged the government to change course.

Thanks in part to this kind of journalism, *The Continent* has attracted funders who support the mission of providing quality journalism in a format that people want to read. Approximately 200 journalists and writers from across Africa have been paid for their contributions, and *The Continent's* business model allows them to work from their home countries.

Though funding is important to support its operations, remuneration alone doesn't enable *The Continent* to provide free, quality journalism. It also leans on its relationships—with readers, grantees, and other regional outlets—to fulfil its mission.

As *The Continent's* experience suggests, people want quality journalism, and readers want to share it. They especially want to share it in the encrypted social platforms where most newspapers are not present.

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Journalism is a bulwark against disinformation's dangerous impact and other threats to the integrity of the information space. Empowering news consumers with trusted information allows them to question manipulation and engage in the democratic process of a country. *The Continent* and its peers are examples that media can meet readers where they are and give them something other than disinformation to share.

KEY POINTS:

- Outlets should format media content for direct messaging apps like WhatsApp and WeChat, among others—especially in developing democracies where internet or data access is limited.
- It is vital to engage readers directly and personally to encourage trust among readership and meet popular demand for truthful and accessible sources of news and information.
- Strong editorial processes are critical in countering disinformation and building trust with audiences.
- Emerging media platforms should diversify their funding sources to best balance donor preferences and maintain sustainability for low-profit models.

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Endnotes

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