Bongi Bozo

Bongi Bozo

Bongi Bozo

# CHANNELLING A COMMUNITY'S CORE ISSUES
## BY BONGI BOZO AND SAMSON SIVIWE FEKETHA

Social media in the Eastern Cape and in South Africa more generally has developed into a platform that is used to channel voices of ordinary citizens. Social networks such as Twitter and Facebook have become popular communication tools among South Africans, with local independent community media in the Eastern Cape adopting Facebook to increase readership and public participation.

Almost all of the 19 licensed community radio stations and some of the independent community newspapers are using Facebook to communicate with their communities. Despite financial constraints and limited internet access, media houses are using internet cafes, smart phones, 3G cards and telecentres as alternatives in order to encourage different views, opinions and voices.

*Skawara News*, a small weekly community newspaper in Comfivaba in the rural Transkei has adopted Facebook as a communication strategy to improve its educating, informing and entertaining mandate. More importantly it has done so to improve its services as a platform for diverse voices and to communicate citizens' needs and concerns to government. Access to media products in Comfivaba is limited; *Skawara* is the only local community newspaper available in the area and, as such, readers depend on it to get local news, such as municipal notices and court cases.

*Skawara* recognises that public participation is important in building

an effective democracy and that in order to participate effectively citizens need to be informed. The newspaper is using its Facebook page to extend discourse on topics that have been covered as news stories in the newspaper or just any topical issue that emerges in the Comfivaba community and its surroundings. The Facebook page is not only used to provide a platform for the voiceless; it is also used to increase readership and public participation in local government.

Community members in Cofimvaba, just like in any other small town, depend on the local municipality for basic service delivery. When municipal transparency and efficiency is at stake with regard to the provision of these services, it becomes the role of the existing media in that area to be the voice of the people who, because of not knowing what to do, may feel hopeless and voiceless. People want continual updates on the issues of local government and service delivery, and these are the types of stories covered by *Skawara*.

According to Wandile Fana, editor of *Skawara*, the Facebook page has been in existence for two years. It has not only attracted patronage from locals who are currently away from home, but has also increased the readership of the paper and made community members more interested in expressing their issues because they see it as a relevant platform to engage with local government.

"*Skawara* has gained advertising revenue, popularity and online patronage

even from Intsika Yethu community members who are currently elsewhere in the world, because even youth who usually shy away from participating in issues are present in the discourse too as they like social networks," said Fana.

The platform has proven to be an effective tool in reflecting the core issues of the daily lives of the people in the area and is being complemented by the willingness of some local leaders who also take time to respond to some of the issues and give direction where necessary.

Although most community radio stations and independent community newspapers in the province are using social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, it is only a few which use these networks innovatively for citizen participation and for holding government accountable. Additionally, internet access still remains a challenge for most community media houses. Most community media houses in the province still do not have consistent internet access. This is one of the challenges that cause local independent community media not to take full advantage of social media.

Internet at *Skawara* offices is accessed through a reciprocal agreement between the editor and owner of *Skawara* and the local telecentre managed by the Universal Service and Access Agency if South Africa. The agreement allows the reporters from *Skawara* to have internet access at the telecentre, and in return the community newspaper provides free advertising for them. To this end, *Skawara* has created

a platform for participatory community engagement in local governance and community development through Facebook.

In order to draw readers to its Facebook page, *Skawara* has a section in its printed newspaper where it publishes some of the comments made by readers on a particular topic each week. This motivates people to join *Skawara* on Facebook and make its Facebook commentator want to buy the hardcopy. This has caused an increase in *Skawara* readership especially among the youth, who remain glued to their mobile phones exchanging views on stories and sharing views with other community members on Facebook.

Municipal officials, teachers and other community leaders are also part of the dialogue, allowing the newspaper to better serve its mandate of community development. The municipal officials joining the Facebook discussion make these debates more robust and balanced. However, challenges arise when Skawara is occasionally threatened by local leaders when they are put in the spotlight through comments on the page. "Many leaders only like and appreciate the *Skawara* page and its content when it is not them who are written about, but this shows how powerful the page is," said Fana.

As such, *Skawara* is one of the successful case studies of independent community media in the Eastern Cape which has used social media to its advantage.