

Challenges Faced by Media in Covering Political Parties' Election Activities in Zambia: Digital Journalism, AI-Driven Fact-Checking and Democratic Media Accountability

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Abstract —A free, independent, and accountable media is foundational to democratic governance providing citizens with the information they need to make informed electoral choices, holding political parties accountable to their stated platforms, and serving as a watchdog against electoral misconduct. In Zambia, media coverage of political party election activities faces significant challenges encompassing editorial independence pressures, resource constraints, safety risks for journalists, regulatory interference, and the emerging threats of digital misinformation and social media manipulation. This article examines the challenges faced by media in covering political parties' election activities, with reference to a case study of Kanyonyo Ward, contextualising findings within global scholarship on digital journalism, AI-driven fact-checking, algorithmic misinformation detection, and democratic media accountability. Drawing on a descriptive survey, findings identify political pressure on editorial independence, limited journalist training in election reporting, resource constraints, access restrictions, and digital misinformation propagation as primary challenges. AI-powered fact-checking tools, digital journalist safety platforms, and blockchain-enabled editorial transparency systems are identified as promising technological responses. Policy recommendations are presented.

Keywords — *Media Coverage; Elections; Political Parties; Zambia; Digital Journalism; AI Fact-Checking; Misinformation; Democratic Accountability.*

1. Introduction

Democratic elections are the foundational mechanism through which citizens exercise political agency, and the quality of democratic choice depends critically on the availability of accurate, balanced, and accessible information about political parties, their candidates, and their programmes (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Venice et al., 2025f). The media encompassing print, broadcast, and digital journalism plays an irreplaceable role in this democratic information ecosystem, providing coverage of election campaigns, scrutinising political party claims, and facilitating public deliberation about electoral choices (Vettriselvan et al., 2026b; Kariveliparambil et al., 2026a).

In Zambia, the democratic quality of electoral media coverage is constrained by a range of structural, resource, political, and technological challenges that limit the media's capacity to fulfil its democratic accountability function particularly in rural constituencies and local government electoral contexts such as ward elections (Vettriselvan et al., 2025c; Venice et al., 2025a). The global digital transformation of the media landscape characterised by social media proliferation, algorithmic content distribution, AI-generated content, and digital misinformation ecosystems has added new dimensions of complexity and challenge to political election coverage, simultaneously enabling new forms of citizen information access and

creating new vectors for electoral manipulation and voter deception (Venice et al., 2025f; Vinodh et al., 2026a). This article examines the specific media coverage challenges in the Zambian electoral context and identifies evidence-based digital solutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Freedom, Editorial Independence and Political Pressure

Editorial independence the freedom of media organisations to make editorial decisions about content, framing, and emphasis without undue influence from political, commercial, or state actors is the foundational precondition for democratic media accountability in election coverage (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Venice et al., 2025f). In Zambia, as in many sub-Saharan African democracies, editorial independence faces structural threats from state media ownership, advertising dependency on politically connected businesses, journalist employment vulnerability, and informal pressure from ruling party officials on media management (Vettriselvan et al., 2026b; Kariveliparambil et al., 2026b). Research on Zambian media has documented patterns of election coverage that favour ruling party candidates in state-owned media outlets, with opposition parties receiving significantly less and more negatively framed coverage (Venice et al., 2025a; Vinodh et al., 2026a). Digital media platforms particularly

social media and independent online news outlets have partially democratised Zambian election information access by enabling opposition parties, citizen journalists, and civil society organisations to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and reach voters directly (Venice et al., 2025c; Swadhi et al., 2025b). However, digital media access remains uneven across Zambia's geographic and socioeconomic landscape with rural communities, older voters, and less-educated citizens remaining more dependent on traditional broadcast media that are more vulnerable to political pressure (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025a; Vettriselvan et al., 2025b).

2.2 AI-Driven Fact-Checking and Misinformation Detection

AI-powered fact-checking and misinformation detection systems represent one of the most significant technological advances for democratic media accountability in election contexts (Venice et al., 2025b; Akila et al., 2025). Natural language processing algorithms trained on authoritative electoral information can automatically flag political party claims that contradict verified facts enabling real-time fact-checking at the scale of social media information flows that human fact-checkers cannot match (Venice et al., 2025d; Devi et al., 2025).

Machine learning models that identify statistical patterns characteristic of coordinated inauthentic behaviour including bot-driven content amplification, artificially inflated engagement metrics, and template-based misinformation campaigns enable platform operators and electoral authorities to detect and disrupt digital manipulation operations (Venice et al., 2025a; Rajeswari et al., 2026). Blockchain-enabled election information authenticity systems that create verifiable, tamper-proof records of official electoral authority communications including candidate registration data, polling station locations, voting procedures, and official results provide citizens and journalists with a trusted reference source against which potentially manipulated information can be verified (Venice et al., 2025c; Venice et al., 2025b). Digital literacy education programmes that equip citizens and journalists with the skills to identify misinformation indicators, verify source credibility, and critically evaluate political content are essential complements to AI detection technology in building population-level resilience against electoral misinformation (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025a; Vettriselvan et al., 2025d).

2.3 Journalist Safety and Capacity in Election Coverage

Journalist safety during election campaign coverage is a significant constraint on election reporting quality in contexts where political competition generates social

tension, intimidation of media personnel, and occasional physical violence against journalists covering opposition-related events (Kariveliparambil et al., 2026b; Vettriselvan et al., 2025c). Digital journalist safety platforms including encrypted communication tools, real-time location sharing with editorial offices, and digital incident reporting systems provide operational safety infrastructure that enables journalists to continue reporting from high-risk environments (Venice et al., 2025f; Vettriselvan et al., 2026b). Journalist capacity in election-specific reporting methodologies including data journalism, polling analysis, campaign finance reporting, and electoral integrity monitoring is frequently limited in Zambian regional media, constraining the depth and analytical quality of election coverage (Gayathri et al., 2025b; Venice et al., 2025a).

2.4 Civic Education, Media Literacy and Democratic Participation

Media literacy the capacity to critically evaluate media content, identify bias and misinformation, and use diverse information sources for informed democratic participation is a foundational civic competency that civic education programmes should develop in all citizens (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025a). AI-powered civic education platforms that deliver interactive media literacy and critical information evaluation skills through engaging digital formats can build population-level democratic information resilience that strengthens the media accountability ecosystem beyond what journalism quality improvements alone can achieve (Venice et al., 2025a; Vasantha et al., 2025). Community-based digital media literacy programmes that reach citizens without digital access through trusted community intermediaries including civic society organisations, religious institutions, and local government structures extend media literacy benefits to the most digitally excluded democratic participants (Kariveliparambil et al., 2026a; Rasi & Ashifa, 2019).

3. Methodology

A descriptive survey design was employed to examine challenges faced by media in covering political parties' election activities in Zambia, with specific reference to Kanyonyo Ward. Mixed methods combined journalist questionnaires, editorial staff interviews, citizen focus group discussions on election information access, and content analysis of sampled election coverage materials (Kombo & Tromp, 2014; Orodho & Kombo, 2012). The sample comprised 25 journalist respondents, 8 editorial management key informants, and 3 citizen focus groups. Content analysis examined 60 election news items across three media outlets for balance, sourcing, and editorial independence indicators. Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data; descriptive statistics for quantitative data.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Editorial Independence and Political Pressure

Among journalist respondents, 76% reported experiencing direct or indirect pressure from political party representatives or management to alter election coverage content. State-affiliated media journalists reported significantly higher political pressure than private media counterparts (88% vs 62%). Content analysis of sampled election coverage revealed ruling party coverage constituting 65% of total political coverage in state media, compared to 45% in private media — a balance deficit inconsistent with free and fair election coverage standards (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Venice et al., 2025f).

4.2 Resource and Capacity Constraints

Resource constraints were identified as a significant coverage challenge by 84% of journalist respondents, including: inadequate transport to cover campaign events across multiple ward locations (78%), absence of recording and editing equipment for broadcast quality production (65%), limited data journalism and polling analysis skills (72%), and insufficient time allocation by editorial management for election coverage preparation and verification (60%) (Gayathri et al., 2025b; Vettriselvan et al., 2025c).

4.3 Digital Misinformation

Seventy percent of journalist respondents reported encountering social media misinformation about election candidates or processes that they were subsequently unable to efficiently verify or counter highlighting the absence of effective AI fact-checking infrastructure in Zambia's electoral information ecosystem (Venice et al., 2025b; Akila et al., 2025). Citizen focus group participants reported significant confusion about election information credibility, with 65% unable to reliably distinguish authoritative from manipulated electoral information when encountered on social media platforms (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025a; Venice et al., 2025a).

4.4 Journalist Safety

Physical safety incidents during election coverage were reported by 32% of journalist respondents including equipment confiscation by political party supporters, intimidation of journalists at campaign events, and verbal threats related to coverage perceived as unfavourable by party operatives. None of the study media organisations possessed formal journalist safety protocols or digital security infrastructure for protecting reporters in high-risk coverage environments (Kariveliparambil et al., 2026b; Venice et al., 2025f).

5. Discussion

The findings paint a concerning picture of Zambian electoral media coverage constrained by political pressure, resource scarcity, capacity deficits, and emerging digital misinformation threats a combination that systematically undermines the media's democratic accountability function during election periods. The pattern of ruling party coverage dominance in state media, combined with the documented political pressure on editorial decisions, suggests structural threats to electoral information equity that technology alone cannot resolve without accompanying regulatory and governance reform (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Venice et al., 2025f; Vinodh et al., 2026a). AI fact-checking tools and blockchain electoral information authenticity systems can significantly reduce the misinformation dimension of media coverage challenges, but require investment in digital infrastructure and journalist training that current resource levels do not support (Venice et al., 2025b; Akila et al., 2025).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has examined challenges faced by media in covering election activities in Zambia, connecting local evidence with global scholarship on digital journalism and AI fact-checking. Recommendations: (1) establish AI-powered fact-checking infrastructure for election coverage in Zambian media organisations (Venice et al., 2025b; Akila et al., 2025); (2) implement blockchain-enabled electoral information authenticity verification systems (Venice et al., 2025c; Rajeswati et al., 2026); (3) strengthen journalist safety protocols through digital security infrastructure and editorial management commitment (Venice et al., 2025f; Kariveliparambil et al., 2026b); (4) reform state media editorial governance to ensure coverage balance in election reporting (Vettriselvan et al., 2025d; Venice et al., 2025a); and (5) integrate media literacy and digital critical thinking into civic education curricula (Vijayalakshmi et al., 2025a; Vasantha et al., 2025).

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