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The Science of Sustainability at a Campus Radio Station in Namibia - A Case Study in the Development of African Campus Media in Challenging Circumstances

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Abstract

Campus media—student radio, newspapers, online platforms, and hybrid community outlets based on university campuses—play an increasingly important role in African higher education systems. They function simultaneously as training laboratories for emerging media workers, as key communication tools for universities, and as community-serving media institutions that often fill gaps left by under-resourced local news ecosystems. However, campus media in Africa face persistent challenges, including unstable funding, leadership constraints, high presenter turnover, outdated equipment, and pressures on editorial independence. Using a qualitative thematic analysis centred on in-depth interviews with several management staff and one long-term volunteers, the campus radio station of the Namibia University of Science and Technology, this paper examines three overarching dimensions of campus media in the African context: teaching, management, and sustainability. The analysis is supported by secondary scholarly literature on community media, African higher education, media development, and journalism training.

Findings show that campus radio stations such as NUST FM operate under hybrid mandates: providing hands-on training to student journalists, reflecting the voices and needs of university communities, and contributing to national information ecosystems. At the same time, stations encounter structural challenges that mirror wider issues in African media: resource scarcity, political/administrative pressure, infrastructural deficits, competition with commercial media, and regulatory complexity. The paper calls for rethinking campus media governance models, strengthening partnerships with journalism departments and industry, ensuring editorial independence, and establishing diversified revenue strategies for long-term sustainability.

Keywords

Radio, community radio, campus radio, sustainability, governance, ethics

INTRODUCTION

Campus media in Africa occupy a unique and often contradictory position. They exist at the intersection of education, public communication, and community media, and frequently blend characteristics of all three sectors (Banda, 2013; Bosch, 2018;). Unlike purely commercial media, they have goals that include training students and giving a voice to university communities. Unlike student clubs, they must comply with national broadcasting regulations. Unlike traditional community media, they are embedded within hierarchical universities that may prioritise institutional reputation over editorial independence. As African countries expand their higher-education systems and face challenges in both journalism education and news sustainability (Mabweazara, 2015; Berger, 1998), campus media provide essential platforms for experiential learning. Nevertheless, they are simultaneously tested by resource limitations, shifts in digital

media consumption, governance constraints, and increasing socio-political pressures.

This article focuses on the teaching, management, and sustainability of campus media in Africa, drawing on insights from interviews with several managers and one long-term volunteer staff member at NUST FM, the campus radio station of Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST). Through this case study, the paper examines how one station navigates training responsibilities, institutional hierarchies, regulatory contexts, and operational challenges. The analysis engages with existing literature and draws conclusions relevant to campus media across the continent.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Campus Media in African Higher Education

Campus media encompasses university-affiliated platforms such as radio stations, newspapers, online publications, podcasts, and television channels. Radio remains the most popular medium in much of Africa, owing to its low cost, ease of use, and compatibility with strong oral communication traditions (Fraser & Restrepo, 2002; Wanyeki, 2000). Research consistently shows that campus radio, in particular, speaks to a wide range of audiences, including students, academic staff, neighbouring communities, and, in some cases, listeners at a national level (Bosch, 2016).

Campus media in Africa are typically governed using one of three broad models. Some outlets are run by students, who have considerable editorial freedom but often struggle with limited funding and infrastructure. Others are tightly controlled by universities, benefiting from stronger institutional support but with limited independence. A third, hybrid model incorporates elements of both, with community broadcasters serving university and public audiences under community media regulations (Rennie, 2006).

NUST FM aligns most closely with this hybrid model. Although it holds a community broadcasting licence, it is administratively located within the university's marketing department. This dual positioning places the station in a particularly complex space, where educational goals, community service commitments, and institutional priorities intersect. Such tensions are not unique to NUST FM but reflect broader dynamics that characterise campus media across the African higher education landscape (Mare et al, 2022).

Journalism Training and Practical Skills

Across Africa, journalism educators consistently emphasise the importance of practical, hands-on training, especially since programs that focus too heavily on theory often leave graduates unprepared for the realities of professional newsrooms (De Beer et al., 2017). Campus media play an important role in bridging this gap by providing students with opportunities to participate directly in live broadcasting, news writing, audio production, interviewing, equipment operation, and ethical decision-making in real-world contexts.

This type of learning closely resembles experiential learning theory, which emphasises the importance of learning by doing (Kolb, 2014), and it directly addresses industry expectations for graduates who can function effectively in converged and multimedia news environments. Despite this potential, there is no guarantee that campus media will be educational. Their effectiveness is heavily dependent on adequate resources and meaningful integration into formal academic programmes, both of which many African institutions continue to struggle with (Berger, 1998).

Management of Campus Media

Management arrangements for campus media vary widely across African universities, yet several recurring challenges emerge in the literature. These include institutional gatekeeping and control (Bosch, 2018), financial oversight by university administrations, and ongoing debate over whether campus media should prioritise student training or broader public service. In addition, practical challenges such as accommodating academic schedules and managing high student turnover affect station culture and long-term viability.

Many of these issues revolve around a fundamental management dilemma: whether to treat a campus media outlet as an independent media organisation or as an extension of the university's corporate communication structures. The way this question is answered has significant implications for editorial autonomy, decision-making processes, and the station's ability to respond flexibly to both educational and community needs (Nyabuga, 2017).

Sustainability Challenges

Media sustainability refers to the capacity of media organisations and systems to remain financially viable, editorially independent, socially relevant, and operationally resilient over the long term. It encompasses the ability of media institutions to adapt to technological change, evolving audience preferences, and shifting economic conditions while continuing to produce accurate, diverse, and ethical journalism (UNESCO, 2021; Media and Journalism Research Center, 2022).

It is thus a broad concept and goes beyond often-cited challenges such as financial pressures due to social media and generative artificial intelligence, or the erosion of community trust in objective journalism. Media sustainability in Africa requires media to be responsive to the unique challenges of the continent, including technological and digital inequality, the rise of ethnocentrism in politics, constraints with skills development and the effects of climate change, to name but a few (Adjin-Tettey & Olausson, 2021; Tella, 2022; Booker et al., 2025)

Sustainable media play a vital role in supporting democratic governance by providing reliable information, fostering public participation, and maintaining editorial independence from political or commercial influence. Consequently, media sustainability is increasingly recognised as a prerequisite for preserving media freedom, pluralism, and public trust (Picard, 2011).

Community and campus media face persistent sustainability challenges worldwide, especially in Africa (Howley, 2010). Common challenges include unstable funding streams, limited advertising potential, regulatory demands imposed by national communications authorities, ageing or malfunctioning equipment, and inadequate integration of digital technologies. As a result, financial, infrastructural, editorial, and pedagogical factors all contribute to campus media sustainability.

These pressures are especially acute in Africa, where campus media is at the crossroads of global media economic changes and local realities such as underfunded higher education systems and complex regulatory frameworks (Mabweazara, 2015; African Media Barometer, 2022). In this context, the NUST FM interview serves as an important case study, bringing these broader structural challenges to light through a concrete institutional example.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative case study design. Its primary data source is a transcribed interview between the author and four managers, including a senior manager, and one long-term volunteer of NUST FM. Clearance was obtained from the university's responsible offices to conduct the interviews. Responses were anonymised to protect respondents' identities. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data, in accordance with Clarke et al's (2017) framework. This process revealed several overarching themes, including training and pedagogy, management structures and institutional politics, audience engagement and public mandates, operational challenges, and questions about sustainability and future direction. To strengthen the analysis, relevant secondary sources were used to place the findings within the context of African media and journalism scholarship.

FINDINGS

Teaching Through Campus Media

A manager at the radio station explained that one of NUST FM's central objectives is to provide students with strong technical and journalistic training. She described this approach as "more technical," with an emphasis on teaching students how to conduct proper research, identify credible sources, and present

information accurately and without bias. This emphasis is consistent with scholarship that emphasises the importance of newsroom experience as a necessary complement to academic journalism education (Deuze, 2006).

This process fosters a diverse set of skills. They include conducting research and fact-checking, determining the credibility of sources, microphone etiquette, operating studio equipment, production techniques, and adhering to ethical and impartial reporting standards. These experiences help to bridge what the manager calls the "thin line" between classroom theory and real-world media practice.

A staff member working in publicity at the radio station said that "often students come to us with a kind of knowledge of how to do radio. However, they have not been in the trenches much. So, we have to show them the intensity of working at a real-world radio station." For this person, campus radio does not provide basic training but allows a professionalisation experience (if a harsh one) that allows students to operationalise their training.

Another manager, however, said that NUST-FM was willing to take on anyone. "We can train them from the bottom up, if need be," she said.

Importantly, NUST FM offers an entry point into the media industry for students who are not formally enrolled in journalism programs. In this way, campus radio serves as an inclusive training space, bolstering Bosch's (2016, 2018) claim that community radio plays an important role in democratising media participation.

Inclusivity: Training Beyond Journalism Students

NUST FM takes an open and inclusive approach to training, inviting presenters from across the university, regardless of academic discipline. As stated by a manager: "We take anybody with the passion… whether or not they come from a journalistic background." This openness contributes to a more diverse learning environment and promotes media literacy among a larger portion of the student population.

In doing so, the station's role goes beyond serving as a specialised training facility for journalism students. Instead, it expands into a broader development platform that promotes personal growth, communication skills, and civic awareness throughout the university.

NUST-FM's incubation approach has its limitations. A long-term volunteer noted that she came to the radio station as an English and linguistics major with "basically no experience":

> I had to learn on the go, and indeed I did. Now, I can say there is almost nothing I don't know about the operations of a radio station. But then, at first, it was very hard. I wish I could have had some kind of theoretical introduction or background, as the journalism students had had.

A manager explained that NUST FM regularly invites industry professionals to conduct refresher training sessions. These engagements ensure that students are exposed to current industry standards and practices while also increasing the station's credibility within the broader media landscape. Students benefit from access to working professionals because it provides valuable insight into newsroom realities and increases their employability.

The combination of experiential learning and professional mentoring is widely regarded as best practice in university-based media education. Campus media can help bridge the gap between academic learning and professional expectations by combining hands-on experience with external expertise (Berger, 1998; Banda, 2013).

NUST FM makes a concerted effort to include academic knowledge in its programming. Segments such as Research Matters allow professors and researchers to share their work, whereas health-related programs rely on the expertise of medical professionals. Additionally, weekly Student Representative Council (SRC) updates keep listeners informed about student governance and institutional affairs. With this mix of content, the station actively translates university knowledge into formats that are accessible to a wider audience.

This role is especially important in Africa, where university-produced research is often underutilised outside of academia. At the same time, much of the modern media landscape, particularly on social media platforms, is rife with misinformation, conspiracy narratives, and unverified claims. Campus media is uniquely positioned to address this issue by providing credible, evidence-based information in ways that are both accurate and personally meaningful to listeners (Mare et al, 2019).

Management of Campus Media

NUST FM has a relatively large management team. The Station Manager is at the top of the hierarchy, reporting directly to the University's Management Committee. Under the Station Manager, there are dedicated managers responsible for production, communications, marketing, and programming.

It was once the case that many campus and community radio stations in Africa operated with only one full-time employee or relied entirely on volunteers (Bosch, 2016). However, they have increasingly become professionalised, with more full-time, or at least paid, staff and a place in the university's bureaucratic hierarchy. Sometimes this has been combined with a more 'traditional' volunteer-based model (see, for example Odartey-Wellington et al, 2020; Rambe & Madichie, 2020; Serwornoo, 2017; Rowland, 2023).

NUST FM's more complex structure reflects substantial institutional investment, ensuring stability and resources. At the same time, it adds layers of bureaucracy, which can impede decision-making and operational flexibility. However, for the generation of actual content, the station relies mostly on volunteers, most of whom are students.

A manager in charge of production confirmed this hybrid structure, noting:

> We are a kind of 'neither fish nor fowl' operation. We rely on professionals to guide the students. But we also keep the operation lean when it comes to professionals. We depend on the volunteers for our day-to-day content. Also, we don't always have the resources to put into stories or management that a fully commercial radio station would have.

One manager emphasised an important aspect of NUST FM's management: the station organisationally falls under the University's Corporate Engagement and Internationalisation unit, primarily in the marketing department. This positioning has significant implications. The station is treated as a marketing asset rather than just a journalism platform.

As a result, university administrators may choose institutional reputation over editorial independence. In situations like this, campus media may be perceived and used as public relations tools rather than democratic, student-driven, or community-oriented platforms.

Interviews revealed a clear tension between editorial goals and institutional oversight. As a senior manager recounted, "We almost couldn't remain neutral... because you fall under a department that wants to shape the narrative," referring to coverage of a student protest. She continued: "I was restricted from sharing content that would go against what they perceived as negative publicity."

Another manager noted,

> You know, out there, we can be very critical of, say, the Government or a private business, or a political party... But here... I am not saying we would lie, you must understand... But its kind-of understood you would want to present the University in a good light...

A volunteer who had worked for several years at the radio station said,

> When there have been student protests or critical coverage in the mainstream media, I don't think we did anything unethical at the time. But because of where we are situated, we were very careful to always get comment from the university. Part of our role, I guess, is ensuring the university has a right to reply to these things.

Thus, we can see that both managers and volunteers have tried to negotiate the meaning of working in a radio station that is technically part of the university structure, while trying to maintain loyalty to journalistic norms and codes of conduct.

Such conflicts are not uncommon in African universities, where administrators often regard campus media as potential reputational risks rather than spaces for student learning. Similar patterns have been reported in South Africa and Kenya (Bosch, 2018; Nyabuga, 2017). The example highlights a central issue confronting campus media: they are tasked with preparing students to be independent journalists, but they operate under the structural and bureaucratic authority of the very institutions they are supposed to scrutinise.

A major issue identified during the interview was high staff turnover. A manager explained, "The turnover is extremely high… many have little to no experience… we must quickly train new presenters." Several factors contribute to this problem, including student graduations, academic schedules that conflict with production and on-air shifts, and the recruitment of talented presenters by commercial radio stations.

Because NUST FM operates largely on a volunteer basis, with only a basic stipend for presenters and journalists, there is little incentive for non-management staff to remain once better-paid opportunities arise. This turnover disrupts programme consistency, which can erode audience loyalty. It also erodes the station's institutional memory, because departing presenters bring with them both production expertise and valuable knowledge of the community and its audience.

While high turnover of staff and leadership is common in community media around the world (see Kruger, 2023; Milan, 2009), the problem is especially acute in Africa due to economic constraints and limited job opportunities, even for graduates. In Namibia, research on volunteer-driven community radio has shown that low or no pay in contexts of limited economic opportunity often results in high staff turnover, even in well-established stations (Ellis, 2008).

Operational and Structural Challenges

One manager highlighted a major operational challenge at NUST FM: "Equipment maintenance or renewal… there are too many processes… you have equipment that's not working. There are many bureaucratic processes during which we have to show that new equipment is required, despite other priorities for university procurement." This situation reflects broader challenges facing African campus and community media, where outdated infrastructure frequently limits performance and media output quality (African Media Barometer, 2022).

Because NUST FM is not a separate legal entity, it must navigate the University's procurement system while competing with other academic priorities such as books, laboratory computers, and necessary teaching resources. The practical implications are significant: poor audio quality, slower equipment, and difficulties for training students who must learn on outdated tools with limited access to current instructional materials.

NUST FM pays presenters a flat rate per hour. While helpful, this amount is widely regarded as modest and insufficient to retain skilled talent in the long run, serving as a "volunteer's stipend" rather than a competitive, market-aligned salary.

Several additional factors limit financial sustainability. Community-licensed stations face advertising restrictions, university budgets are tight, grants are difficult to obtain, and there is little established fundraising culture. While many African community broadcasters rely heavily on donations, campus stations are rarely eligible for such funds due to their formal affiliation with universities (Fraser & Restrepo, 2002).

One manager explained a key regulatory challenge facing NUST FM: "Once you make a certain percentage from advertising you no longer are community; you are regarded as commercial… and must pay higher rates." This creates a difficult situation for campus stations. They have limited funding and cannot easily increase revenue without risking reclassification, which entails additional administrative and financial obligations.

This regulatory "ceiling" effectively limits growth, reduces opportunities for innovation, and jeopardises campus media's long-term viability.

Audience, Mission and Identity

A senior manager observed that NUST FM often competes with commercial stations such as Fresh FM for a "predominantly black, 18-35 audience, students and young professionals." This highlights a recurring tension in campus radio: defining the organisation's primary mission. Is it primarily used for student training, campus communication, or broadcasting to external audiences with similar demographics, such as age and background?

NUST FM, like many other campus radio stations, must navigate and balance three overlapping audiences. These include an internal academic community, an external youth audience, and a broader regulatory "community of interest," which may include university-leaning listeners, residents of Windhoek and other urban areas with NUST campuses, and those interested in higher education or academic research.

One long-term volunteer said that NUST-FM must "keep pace" with often very dynamic commercial radio stations that serve the youth market. To do this, presenters and journalists have to be aware of "what the youth are thinking, what the trends are, what is happening on social media."

One manager explained that students interact with NUST FM through social media platforms, particularly Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp, as well as via call-ins and participatory segments during programmes. This two-way interaction reinforces campus media's role as a democratic forum in which audiences can contribute, respond, and shape the conversation.

NUST FM collaborates closely with a wide range of stakeholders, including faculty departments, the SRC, student clubs, and university administration. By incorporating academic content such as research highlights, health topics, and program promotion, the station actively reinforces its educational mission.

This approach reflects the broader role that campus media can play in African universities, facilitating knowledge transfer and bridging the gap between academic work and the general student body (see Mare et al, 2022).

Sustainability: Risks, Opportunities and Future Directions

Campus media rely heavily on transient student staff, posing challenges for continuity and long-term planning. To address this, potential strategies include establishing multi-year fellowships, hiring graduate interns, increasing alum mentorship, and developing detailed succession plans. NUST FM's experience with high turnover demonstrates the importance of implementing structured and predictable staffing arrangements to maintain stability and institutional knowledge.

Interviews undertaken emphasised the risks of subsuming campus radio under university marketing departments. For long-term sustainability, governance should include independent editorial boards comprised of students, faculty, alums, and community members. Such structures can act as a buffer between station management and university public relations priorities, ensuring that editorial policies are firmly based on journalistic ethics.

NUST FM stands to benefit from strengthening external partnerships. All interviewees said that African campus media could collaborate with them, as could local commercial broadcasters to support training pipelines, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focused on health, youth development, or media literacy, national regulators for compliance guidance, and journalism departments to integrate content into academic curricula. These collaborations can improve training quality, diversify programming, and open up new funding opportunities.

NUST FM could improve its financial sustainability by diversifying its revenue streams. Sponsored educational segments, training workshops for external audiences, event hosting and MC services (already in use at the station), alum contributions, grant funding for science communication, and collaborations with technology companies to secure equipment donations are all possible options. Adopting a diversified funding model would reduce the station's reliance on university funds and improve its long-term viability.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES WITH OTHER AFRICAN CAMPUS MEDIA

Campus radio stations in Namibia have much to gain from a comparative perspective by looking at media operating on similar models in South Africa, a neighbour with which Namibia shares many historical and economic ties, as well as at campus media in West and East Africa. These reveal common trends, tensions, and possible growth points.

Campus radio stations in South Africa, such as Rhodes Music Radio, Tuks FM, and UCT Radio, face a number of ongoing challenges (Lotter, 2007; Mathebula, 2024; Bosch, 2018). High turnover is an ongoing issue, as student presenters and producers often leave after graduation or struggle to balance academic obligations with station responsibilities.

These stations must also deal with institutional pressures, such as aligning programming with university expectations or adhering to strict administrative policies that can restrict creative freedom. Financial constraints complicate operations. Many stations rely on small grants, irregular sponsorships, or fundraising events, which often delay necessary upgrades, such as new studio equipment or digital broadcasting tools (Moffat et al., 2025).

At the same time, South African campus media must strike a delicate balance between serving as training platforms for students and providing engaging content to listeners. Decisions about how much airtime to devote to developing inexperienced presenters versus producing polished shows that attract larger audiences are an ongoing operational challenge.

University-based media in Kenya and Uganda often act as community broadcasters, reaching far beyond their campuses. These outlets face ongoing challenges such as equipment shortages, fluctuating funding, and complex regulatory requirements (Nyabuga, 2017). By deliberately expanding their reach to neighbouring towns, informal settlements, and larger regional communities, these stations provide clear public value through locally relevant news, vernacular programming, and participatory formats.

However, this outward reach exposes campus stations to operational stresses similar to those encountered by independent community broadcasters. Older studio equipment and transmitters reduce program quality and signal reliability. Funding can be inconsistent, relying on a patchwork of university subventions, small-scale advertising, and short-term donor grants, which forces managers to use stopgap budgeting and prevents long-term investment in training and infrastructure. Complex regulatory environments, such as licensing rules, spectrum regulations, and shifting administrative policies, can cause further disruptions or unexpected cost increases.

Empirical research conducted throughout the region documents these patterns. Studies show that limited capital and lack of equipment maintenance leave many stations dependent on donated or consumer-grade tools, increasing technical downtime and reducing professionalisation of broadcasts (Orina, 2011). Kenyan research demonstrates how campus and community radio stations negotiate their identities and audiences by juggling commercial, community, and educational roles while contending with funding constraints and competitive pressures that limit programming options (Kimani, 2018). Comparative studies highlight similar sustainability challenges in rural and campus settings and recommend improved financial planning, capacity building, and policy engagement as solutions (Busolo, 2016).

Taken together, the evidence suggests that while East African campus media provide valuable community services outside the academy, their long-term effectiveness depends on greater investment in equipment, stable funding streams, and clearer, more supportive regulatory frameworks.

Many Nigerian universities have active student newspapers that provide important platforms for student voice, accountability, and campus-level democracy. Nonetheless, these outlets frequently face censorship and administrative interference (Ojebode & Akingbulu, 2009). Recent reports and studies highlight the growing difficulty for student newspapers to operate freely, with universities occasionally viewing independent publications as threats (Centre for Journalism Innovation & Development, 2025). In some cases, editors have been suspended or disciplined, and newspapers have been outright banned for publishing critical content.

This controlled environment undermines campus journalism's independence and limits newspapers' roles as watchdogs and civic education tools. National student journalist organisations have repeatedly

condemned these practices, pointing out how they undermine a formative environment for press freedom, critical thinking, and transparency at the tertiary level (ICIR, 2016).

Across these case studies, common themes emerge: the tension between editorial independence and institutional oversight, limited training resources, growing pressure to integrate digital media, and regulatory constraints that limit revenue generation. In this broader continental context, NUST FM exemplifies these patterns, highlighting both the opportunities and structural challenges that campus media face.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The interviews undertaken at NUST-FM demonstrate how it, like many other campus media in Africa, must balance multiple, sometimes conflicting mandates. The station serves as a practical training facility for journalism and media students and provides hands-on broadcasting experience to students from other disciplines. At the same time, it serves as both a community broadcaster for the general public and a university communications platform with marketing or public relations functions.

This complex mix of roles causes internal conflict. Editorial independence can be jeopardised when the university prioritises reputation management, and high turnover and outdated equipment impede effective training. However, NUST FM emphasises the strengths of campus media: strong academic collaborations, inclusive training practices, active community engagement, and a clearly defined youth-focused identity. To address these contradictions, campus media must establish clearer governance structures, diversify funding sources, strengthen partnerships, and strategically use digital technologies to expand reach and sustainability.

Campus media in Africa play an important role in journalism education, community engagement, and media democratisation. The case of NUST FM exemplifies both the promise and the challenges that these institutions face. Campus media bridges gaps in academic curricula by providing hands-on experience, equipping students with practical skills required for professional success.

Governance structures influence editorial independence, institutional identity, and operational effectiveness. For campus media to thrive, these structures must be consistent with the station's goals while also accommodating the realities of their larger environment. Long-term sustainability necessitates financial diversification, improved infrastructure, and consistent staffing arrangements.

The NUST FM case also emphasises the often-overlooked role of campus media in public science communication and in combating misinformation, extending their reach beyond the university campus. Persistent challenges, such as high staff turnover, highlight the need for formalised career paths that connect campus media experience to professional opportunities.

Overall, NUST FM exemplifies a hybrid African campus-media model with great potential but hampered by institutional politics, limited resources, and regulatory barriers. Strengthening editorial independence, forming strategic partnerships, and expanding digital capacity are critical steps towards fulfilling its dual role as an educational platform and community service. As Africa's higher education and media landscapes evolve, campus media will continue to be critical spaces for innovation, youth engagement, and democratic participation.

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