WITS CENTRE FOR JOURNALISM



2025

ANNUAL REPORT



UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND, JOHANNESBURG



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A YEAR OF RESILIENCE

Another year is behind us and in this, my fourth year at the helm of the Wits Centre for Journalism, I am incredibly proud of the WCJ's team and students for all that we have achieved, and I continue to marvel at their commitment to journalism and media in this country and abroad.

We ended 2025 by graduating two doctoral students, officially capping off a year of continued growth and resilience in a challenging economic and social climate.

The WCJ continued to focus on health, science and climate journalism and communications along with community journalism and investigative journalism. We recognised that there is far too much for us to do alone, and so we expanded our collaborations and leveraged off the expertise of our partner organisations and their incredible people this year.

We celebrated 21 years of the African Investigative Journalism Conference (AIJC) by announcing that, for the first time in the conference's history, it will be hosted outside of Johannesburg in 2026 by moving to Nairobi, Kenya in collaboration with Aga Khan University.

The WCJ assumed management of the VoW 88.1 community radio station this year, a move intended to expand our offerings in the community media space with a focus on radio. A sizeable financial contribution from Wits University will allow the WCJ to build state of the art studios on the main campus, closer to the student community.

As we close off on this year, we say goodbye to Prof Lesley Cowling who retires from Wits University after 25 years. It is difficult to capture 25 years of impact in a few lines but her colleagues and students will continue to share her legacy in their own lives and work.

I must thank our supporters who have given their time and resources to help the WCJ continue its crucial work in strengthening journalism across the continent. Our strength lies in our collaborative efforts and I am confident that we will continue to grow in impact in 2026.

Dr Dinesh Balliah, WCJ Director





HONOURS

Career-Entry Honours

The career-entry (CE) honours in journalism and media studies programme is the WCJ's flagship programme equipping young students with journalism skills to pursue careers in the vast and increasingly complex information ecosystem.

The class of 2025 produced a podcast series which looked at the Freedom Charter 70 years on, and completed an in-depth peporting project which interrogated the claim that Johannesburg is a 'world-class city'. This year, mentors in the programme included Dr Collen Chambwera, Pheladi Sethusa, Aaisha Dadi-Patel, Dr Lesley Mofokeng and Gillian Jones.

CE Honours highlights in 2025 included:

- Court Reporting Days conducted at the Johannesburg Magistrates and High courts
- Climate Change Reporting Course with Dr Carmen Nicoara (climateXchange)
- A visit to the Dan Corder show at the eNCA studios
- Tour of the The Cradle of Humankind
- A visit to PowerFM studios as part of the radio journalism class with Charles Leonard
- Guest lectures delivered by Ray Mahlaka, Seth Thorne, and Zanele Mji
- Participation at the African Investigative Journalism Conference
- Participation in Reporting on Migration training delivered by IOM (UN Migration)

Mid-Career Honours

Offering a recognition of prior learning option for media workers who do not have an undergraduate degree, the mid-career (MC) honours programme has grown into one of the WCJ's largest and most dynamic groups, including many high-profile reporters. The MC journey helps to strengthen and consolidate professional skills, and is an excellent pathway into the WCJ master's programme for many of our graduates.

MC honours students undertake an in-depth research project at the end of their degree. This year, students engaged with topics ranging from coverage of the Mozambique elections, to sports broadcasting rights, and the role of language in reporting on royal succession.

Career-entry students are supported through bursaries and internships from Moneyweb, Reuters, Bloomberg and the South African Reserve Bank. The programme is also supported by Caxton Publishers.



MASTER'S

The Master's in Journalism programme often attracts mid-career journalists looking to deepen their academic knowledge in the fields of journalism and media studies.

The students engaged with two major issues in the media environment this year: the Competition Commission's inquiry into major digital platforms' dominance of the South African information environment (MDPMI), and the increased use of artificial intelligence in newsrooms.

The developments were interrogated by students who attempted to track their impact on the functioning – and even survival – of journalism in South Africa. This initial work promises to flow into the research reports in the second year. This year also sees the graduation of 14 students, whose research ranged from substantial longform projects on societal issues, such as social grants and inherited trauma, to scholarly examinations of news content and newsroom challenges.



Prof Lesley Cowling retires after a remarkable 25 years at Wits

"The act of looking back brings certain things into sharp focus and – faced today with the twin challenges of a digitised world and a struggling media sector – I feel that I lived though a kind of golden era, an idealised place of contemplation, creativity and growth.

But I also know that the Centre will continue to hold that space open, and that our graduates will continue to make a difference in the wider world."

Read Prof Cowling's reflection here.

PhD PROGRAMME

In 2025, two WCJ students graduated with their PhD degrees in Journalism and Media Studies. Dr Lesley Mofokeng, supervised by Prof Lesley Cowling, produced a thesis entitled *Reimagining Sol Plaatje: Investigating the contribution of the pioneering newspaperman to the history of journalism in South Africa.*

Dr Yarik Turiansky, supervised by Dr Bob Wekesa, produced his thesis entitled *Using 'digital diplomacy' to achieve foreign policy goals: case studies of Kenya, Australia, and the United States.*





WCJ PhD Candidates

Swazi Vilakazi
A critical analysis of the regulatory role of the Press Council of South Africa (PCSA) in South Africa's media landscape, supervised by Dr Dinesh Balliah.

Gillian Jones
Beyond the Bottom Line: Reconceptualising Financial Journalism's Watchdog Role in the Era of Sustainable Finance, co-supervised by Dr Dinesh Balliah and Prof Warren Maroun.

Jimmy Kainja
Mediating representations of witchcraft, vampire and albinism belief narratives in the Malawian press, co-supervised by Dr Nechama Brodie and Dr Albert Sharra.

Lebogang Seale
The Impact of Media Ownership on News Production: The Case of *The Star*, One of South Africa's Preeminent Newspapers, since 2013, supervised by Prof Lesley Cowling.



Safety Matters PhD programme in Norway

The Safety Matters PhD programme is a collaboration between **OsloMet University** in Norway, the **Wits Centre for Journalism** in South Africa, the **University of Sao Paulo** in Brazil, and the **University of Tulsa** in the United States. The programme, coordinated at the WCJ by Dr Nechama Brodie, brings together up to 12 PhD students each year to collaborate on research related to journalism and safety.

In 2025, Wits PhD candidates Gillian Jones and Jimmy Kainja were joined in Oslo by WCJ lecturer Dr Collen Chambwera, who has taught and mentored the PhD cohort for the past two years, and WCJ researcher Dr Thandi Bombi, who presented a paper on the ethics of listening when reporting on xenophobic violence.

ACADEMIC & PROFESSIONAL PROJECTS

Dr Dinesh Balliah

- Worked with para-athlete and journalist Deejay Palesa Manaleng on a project looking at the representation of people with disabilities in news and newsrooms, supported by SIDA through the CHARM Africa programme.
- Project Maai, a data-driven climate storytelling project undertaken with support from climateXchange involved data scientists from eSwatini with colleagues from the UK and USA. Dr Dinesh Balliah acted as a research mentor and ethicist to the data team.

Prof Lesley Cowling

- "The Perils of History: Approaches to the Past in Steinberg's The Number," published in *Literary Journalism Studies*.
- "African American connections in literary journalism: Langston Hughes and the Drum Writers of the 1950s," presented at the International Association of Literary Journalism Studies annual conference in Poughkeepsie, USA.
- "Rethinking the historiography of the study of the Black Press in South Africa", and "Mapping coverage of the Anglo-Boer War: The Case of the Concentration Camps," presented at the International Media and History (IAMHIST) conference.
- Led two research workshops for colleagues in the French-SA research group at IAMHIST and received funding from the French consulate in SA to travel to Nancy, France, for a follow-up workshop.
- Involved in a collaboration between French scholars and the WCJ, which entered a second phase in 2025, examining the ways in which forms of narrative have positioned Southern Africa in the French-speaking world, and vice versa.

Dr Collen Chambwera

- Contributed to a published paper "Decolonizing AI: A Pan African Collaboration: African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning", Journal Issue 5, Volume 9, 2025 Special Issue.
- "Business News Coverage of COVID-19-induced Economic Shutdowns in South Africa and Zimbabwe: A Framing Analysis", published in African Journalism Studies.

Dr Thandi Bombi

- Co-author of "The 1927 Mapleton Train Disaster, Memorialisation, and the Media's Role in Narrating the Dead", in *Media and Communication*.
- Presented ongoing research at the South African Communication Association's 2025 conference — "Listening otherwise and vulnerable communities: Exploring the listening habitus of South African journalists and the news framing of the #JusticeforCwecwe rape case."
- Presented at the 11th annual conference on the safety of journalists at Oslomet — "Protecting Journalistic Integrity: Exploring an ethics of listening otherwise for representing xenophobic violence in the South African context."

Dr Nechama Brodie

- Co-edited a special edition of top-ranked media journal *Media and Communication*, together with Professor Kristin Skare Orgeret (OsloMet) — Orgeret, K. and Brodie, N. (eds). 2025. 'Death Notice/Body Copy: Representations of Death in Global Journalism'. Special issue of Media and Communication Vol 13 2025.
- Presented a session reflecting on ethics and vulnerability in journalism, for the WITS SARIMA CARNEGIE Global Ethics Day programme.
- Coordinator: Responsible Reporting on Whistleblowing handbook, in partnership with GIZ's Transparency, Integrity and Accountability Programme (South Africa) and supported by the South African National Editors' Forum.
- Conducted a baseline survey on the safety of journalists working in community media to better understand the well-being of people working in these spaces, particularly in under-resourced regions across the Global South. The project was supported by SIDA through the CHARM Africa programme.









AFRICAN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM CONFERENCE 2025 - WITS UNIVERSITY

Over 450 delegates from 50 countries participated in 65+ sessions, workshops at the 21st African Investigative Journalism Conference (AIJC), hosted at Wits University in Johannesburg fro 5-7 November 2025. The conference, now in its 21st year, will move for the first time in its history to Nairobi, Kenya in 2026, in collaboration with the Graduate School of Media and Communications at Aga Khan University.

▶ Dewald Van Rensburg of South Africa's *amaBhungane* won the third annual African Investigative Journalist of the Year Award, hosted by the Wits Centre for Journalism and supported by Absa Africa. Second place went to The Gambia's Mustapha K. Darboe of The Republic, while third place runners-up were Ghanaian journalists Seth Bokpe and Edmund Agyemang Boateng of The Fourth Estate. The awards have quickly become the continent's premier investigative journalism award, attracting nearly 200 entries in 2025.

▶ Twenty leading journalists from 13 African countries participated in the 2025 Investigative Journalism Masterclass, hosted by the WCJ in collaboration with SKUP, the Foundation for Investigative Journalism in Norway and Bellingcat, an internationally renowned OSINT training outfit. The intensive three-day training workshop introduced participants to the latest investigative journalism techniques, including cutting-edge digital forensics.

▶ The annual **Carlos Cardoso Memorial Lecture**, held alongside the AIJC, took place at the Wits Great Hall with Mozambican investigative journalism Fernando Lima delivering the keynote. Lima, a close friend of slain Cardoso, reflected on the perils of investigative journalism and the need to ensure the safety of its practitioners. The annual lecture was hosted by the Wits Centre for Journalism in collaboration with the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).



COMMUNITY OUTREACH

VoW 88.1 FM now part of the WCJ stable



The Wits Centre for Journalism has assumed management of the VoW 88.1 community radio station from the Faculty of Humanities at Wits University.

The realignment comes with a substantial investment from Wits University, which will allow the WCJ to build new state-of-the-art studios for the station on the main campus. The inclusion of the radio station in the WCJ stable signals the Centre's commitment to growing its radio practice training and research projects.

Community journalism financial literacy workshops

The Wits Centre for Journalism offers financial journalism training to community media journalists to enhance their financial literacy. The WCJ recognises the role of community media in developing local communities.

This programme, supported by the **South African Reserve Bank (SARB)**, allows the WCJ to develop skills among journalists in this crucial media sector that reaches millions of people daily in local languages.

Two workshops were held in 2025, facilitated by renowned South African financial journalist Jabulani Sikhakhane.

Community engagement through CJN

The **Citizen Justice Network (CJN)**, a project of the Wits Centre for Journalism, capacitates paralegals working in local communities and to develop stories on social issues in local languages.

In 2025, the CJN paralegal network celebrated a decade of working in marginalised rural and peri-urban communities, empowering locals to tell their own stories of social justice that might otherwise go unreported. The stories are developed in collaboration with a network of independent community radio stations, giving communities an opportunity to hear stories about themselves and to hear from community leaders about their approach to solving issues they experience.

Wits Centre for Journalism endorses historic Media 20 Declaration



Wits Centre for Journalism joined colleagues in media, policymakers, academics, and civil society role-players in two days of discussions which culminated in the M20 Declaration, calling on all stakeholders to recognise and affirm the role of the media as a public good and to work towards, among other things, media viability, safety, media freedom and information integrity.

Moxii Africa (previously Media Monitoring Africa) and the **South African National Editors' Forum** convened the first ever media-focused parallel event to the G20 in Johannesburg from 1–2 September 2025.

By the close of the Summit, 49 organisations, including the WCJ, had formally endorsed the Declaration, which was handed over to President Cyril Ramaphosa in November ahead of the G20 Summit in Johannesburg.



Dr Nechama Brodie selected for UK fellowship

WCJ senior lecturer Dr Nechama Brodie was selected for a prestigious African Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the **University of Edinburgh**.

During the two-month fellowship, Dr Brodie will be working with colleagues at the university to develop her work on "necrodata" – a project that explores how death is counted in different contexts, regions, times, and disciplines, and how these data reveal whose deaths are seen to "count", and whose deaths are ignored or overlooked.



Delegates at the Africa-China policy seminar held at Wits University in November.

WCJ hosts successful Africa-China policy symposium

The Centre hosted a symposium on Africa-China relations in November, attended by more than thirty academics, journalists, civic actors and business leaders from South Africa, Zambia, Kenya, Ghana and Senegal.

The symposium, held in collaboration with the **China Global South Project** and convened by WCJ partnerships officer Chris Kabwato, sought to make sense of Africa's position in a shifting global geopolitical context where the rise of China has intensified the rivalry with the Global North.

The keynote address was delivered by human rights leader Deprose Muchena, Director of Resources Futures at the **Open Society Foundations**.

Reporting Climate Change in Africa workshop takes place in Kenya

Dialogue Earth and the Wits Centre for Journalism's **Africa-China Reporting Project (ACRP)** held a workshop on Reporting Climate Change in Africa on 21 February 2025 at Aga Khan University in Nairobi, Kenya.

The workshop convened with selected journalists, media scholars and professionals to develop their skills and knowledge on climate change reporting on the continent.

The workshop followed the launch of the free Reporting Climate Change in Africa online course, developed by **Dialogue Earth**, **ACRP**, **Development Reimagined**, and the **China Global South Project**.

Taco Kuiper Award celebrates journalism excellence in South Africa

Sikonathi Mantshantsha of *News24* took top honours at the 2025 Taco Kuiper Award for Investigative Journalism with his powerful series "Waste Land".

Finalists this year included Dewald van Rensburg (*amaBhungane*), Kyle Cowan (*News24*), Tarryn Crossman (*Carte Blanche*), and Pauli van Wyk (*Daily Maverick*).

The Taco Kuiper Award recognises excellence in South African investigative journalism and has been hosted by the WCJ for the last 19 years. The winner receives a R200 000 cash prize with the runner-up receiving R100 000.

The awards are convened by Beauregard Tromp and supported by the **Valley Trust**.





CHARM Changemakers training bolsters civic engagement in Africa

The **Wits Centre for Journalism**, together with **DefendDefenders**, **Magamba Network** and **Fojo Media**, hosted a powerful five-day training session in Lusaka, Zambia at the beginning of June to strengthen the capacity of media professionals across the continent.

Supported by **SIDA**, the CHARM Changemakers initiative sought to develop the ability of participants to navigate increasingly restricted civic spaces by building practical skills in digital security, mental well-being, and storytelling for advocacy.

The training used participatory methods, hands-on exercises, and creative reflection to ensure that participants were well-equipped to continue their vital work back home.

Green Media Accelerator gives African climate justice projects major boost

Five innovative media startups from Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe received funding to launch climate justice media projects through the inaugural Green Media Accelerator bootcamp.

This initiative, organised by **CHARM Africa** in collaboration with the **Magamba Network**, the **Fojo Institute** and the **WCJ**, with support from **SIDA**, aims to empower media in bridging the gap between grassroots activism, environmental advocacy, and policymaking.

The bootcamp brought together young content creators, journalists, civic rights defenders, and environmental experts to explore the role of media in addressing climate change.

Wits Centre for Journalism joins first climate knowledgeXchange

The first knowledgeXchange (kXc) of 2025 took place from 27 to 28 February in Nairobi, led by WCJ partner **climateXchange**.

The gathering brought together diverse and inspiring media professionals from across Africa to spark ideas for innovative new products and content to change the climate narrative.

The cohort asked questions around what makes a climate story and explored what 'climate' means within individual cultures, before launching into a series of workshops and brainstorming sessions to inspire change in the media landscape when it comes to climate storytelling.

The kXc aims to reshape the climate media ecosystem through regular gatherings of media professionals across the continent.







WEBINARS AND WORKSHOPS

▶ **Webinar: Regulation of Audiovisual Media Services in India and South Africa** - held in collaboration with the Media Leadership Think Tank at GIBS. The panel included Associate Professor at the Centre for Culture, Media and Governance at Jamila Millia Islamia, Prof Vibodh Parthasarathi, Director of the Media Leadership Think Tank at GIBS, Michael Markovitz, and Head of Programmes at Moxii Africa, Thandi Smith.

▶ **Webinar: Responsible Reporting on Whistleblowing** - hosted by award-winning journalist and author Mandy Wiener and WCJ lecturer and author Dr Nechama Brodie. The webinar panel included investigative journalist Jeff Wicks, attorney Charl du Plessis, and economic and organised crime researcher Dr Ugljesa Radulovic. View here.

▶ **Webinar: Reimagining Financial Journalism in the Age of AI** - hosted by WCJ financial journalism lecturer Gillian Jones, with editor of Moneyweb Ryk van Niekerk, and editor and co-founder of Currency News Rob Rose. View here.

▶ **Webinar: AI in African Newsrooms: Towards an Ethical Framework** - held in collaboration with African Women in Media, featuring CEO of KICTANet Dr Grace Githaiga, senior media development manager at the Thomson Reuters Foundation Sara Elkhalili, and lawyer and digital rights advocate Emaediong Akpan, in conversation with WCJ director Dr Dinesh Balliah. View here.

▶ **Lecture: Germany's Dr Peter Frey** - former editor-in-chief of the Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, Dr Peter Frey, delivered a lecture exploring the role of public service broadcasting in a democracy. Referencing the German Public Broadcasting System, Frey stressed the importance of independence from the policitical context of each country.

▶ **Workshops: Media Management** - facilitated by Fray College on behalf of the WCJ, this workshop focused on women journalists and media entrepreneurs from across the continent to improve media business skills.

▶ **Webinar: Levelling the Media Playing Field: Lessons from South Africa** - hosted in collaboration with DW Akademie, featuring WCJ research associate Dr Franz Krüger, independent development and community media specialist Jayshree Pather, executive director of the Association of Independent Publishers Dr Kate Skinner, and WCJ director Dr Dinesh Balliah. View here.

▶ **Workshop: Reporting on Children in the Media** - facilitated by Jamaine Krige and Moxii Africa. The workshop brought together practicing journalists, communicators and human rights activists on a journey of interactive seminars that sought to deepen their reporting skills in the best interests of children.

▶ **Workshop: Mastering the Art of Storytelling With Numbers** - through a combination of hands-on exercises, group discussions and real-world case studies, the workshop equipped financial journalists and communicators with techniques to transform dry, complex financial data into compelling, engaging stories that resonate with their audiences.

▶ **Seminar: Dehli-based photographer Ishan Tankha** - held in collaboration with Wits Sociology, the WCJ hosted internationally acclaimed Delhi-based photographer Ishan Tankha at a postgraduate seminar held at the Centre. Drawing on stories and experiences from his work as an independant photographer, Tankha took attendees through the intricacies of the profession in covering conflict and violence.

▶ **Documentary screening with Ukrainian journalist Nataliya Gumenyuk** - the WCJ hosted Ukrainian journalist and co-founder of the Reckoning Project, Nataliya Gumenyuk, who specialises in conflict reporting. Gumenyuk spoke to WCJ honours and masters students, and screened a short movie about the Russian invasion of the village of Yahidne.

FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

Through partnerships with other institutions and financial support from organisations both local and international , the WCJ is able to undertake its work in growing, deepening and strengthening journalism practice on the African continent.

- **Absa Africa**
- **SIDA**
- **Ford Foundation**
- **CHARM Africa**
- **SKUP**
- **climateXchange**
- **Deutsche Welle**
- **Caxton Publishers**
- **Konrad Adenauer Stiftung**
- **Open Society Foundations**
- **Committee to Protect Journalists**
- **SA Reserve Bank**
- **CFI, French Media Agency**
- **Gates Foundation**
- **Valley Trust**

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Siyabonga Ntuli
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Leon Sadiki
Photographer, sessional

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State of the Newsroom Editor, sessional

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