

The man behind Africa's first AI-powered media monitoring network

The founder of Social Light, an African media monitoring company that is building the continent's first AI-powered media monitoring platform, Tony Mautsu, is a *Forbes 30 under 30* alumnus, but his story starts years before this, with 3 am mornings, lighting fires to warm water for a private school his parents could barely afford.

 By [Danette Breitenbach](#) 13 Mar 2026



Tony Mautsu is a *Forbes 30 under 30 alumni* and the founder of Social Light, a media monitoring company that monitors Africa, and is building Africa's first AI-powered media monitoring platform (Image supplied)

“Being named to the Forbes Africa 30 Under 30 list in 2020, at age 27, wasn't just personal validation - it was proof that an African child who dares to be different can show up despite the odds,” says Botswana-born Mautsu.

Talking about Social Light, he explains that what they are doing is not because they want to replicate what exists elsewhere, but because after nearly a decade of focused work in this space, they understand what Africa actually needs.

“Social Light's story is really a story of listening to what the market was asking for - even when it wasn't what we originally set out to build,” says Mautsu.

Flying blind

Founded in May 2014 as a digital solutions company, Social Light offered social media management, hologram technology, and livestreaming services - the cutting-edge digital tools that were transforming how brands engaged with audiences globally.

“And we were excited about bringing these innovations to African brands, but here's what happened: as we worked with clients across various sectors - financial services, mining, central banking - we kept encountering the same fundamental problem.

“Organisations would come to us wanting to improve their digital presence, launch campaigns, or manage crises - but they had no data to inform their decisions. They were flying blind,” adds Mautsu.

He says these companies were asking them: “What are people saying about us?; How does our reputation compare to competitors?; Where should we focus our communications efforts?”

“We realised that they couldn't answer these questions because there was no comprehensive way to capture what was actually being said about them across the full media landscape.”

Global media monitoring solutions weren't solving this problem because they were designed for markets with reliable internet, consistent power, and where digital channels dominate.

“They didn't account for the African reality,” he says.

“ When the power goes out, when data is too expensive, when there's no signal - people still turn on their radios and read their newspapers. In many areas, broadcast infrastructure limitations mean radio isn't even consistently available, yet it remains more accessible than digital alternatives ”

The African reality

In Southern Africa, media consumption is fragmented by infrastructure constraints. Across Southern Africa internet penetration ranges dramatically - from around 79% in Botswana to just 18% in Malawi. South Africa sits at about 70%, Zimbabwe at 35%, Zambia at 52%, and Lesotho at 48%.

But these numbers only tell part of the story. “Access” doesn't equal “reliability” or “affordability.”

In South Africa, despite 85% electricity access, load-shedding means businesses and consumers regular

lose power for hours. In Zimbabwe, 45% electricity access is compounded by frequent outages. In Malawi, only 13% have access to electricity at all.

“What this means in practice is when a crisis breaks out at 6 pm, and the power goes out across major urban centres, your digital monitoring infrastructure becomes irrelevant.

“Social media conversations stop. Online news sites are inaccessible.

“But radio keeps broadcasting, newspapers were already distributed in the morning, and word-of-mouth accelerates.

“If you're only monitoring digital channels, you're invisible to the crisis until the power comes back on - and by then, the narrative has already been set,” says Mautsu.

So, while a global monitoring tool might focus heavily on social media APIs from platforms like Facebook and X, they're missing the majority of the conversation.

“When the power goes out, when data is too expensive, when there's no signal - people still turn on their radios and read their newspapers.

“In many areas, broadcast infrastructure limitations mean radio isn't even consistently available, yet it remains more accessible than digital alternatives,” he says.

Addresses these realities

Social Light took its digital expertise and applied it to building something Africa actually needed - a media monitoring platform that could capture the real conversations happening across its diverse media ecosystem.

That was nearly a decade ago.

Today their platform monitors 1,353 print publications, 309 radio stations, 206 TV channels, and three social platforms across Botswana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, and Lesotho – because, he says, “that's where the actual conversations are happening”.

They have also developed deep expertise across critical sectors such as financial services, mining and natural resources, central banking and regulatory bodies, and technology and innovation.



DIGITAL

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Why it matters

He explains that reputation management in Africa matters because the cost of getting it wrong - or not monitoring it at all - is existential.

“And the gap between perception and reality has never been more dangerous.”

He points out the fundamental problem: “There's a massive disconnect between how Africa is perceived globally and what's actually happening on the ground. International media outlets often parachute in for crisis coverage or tell surface-level narratives that miss the nuance, complexity, and opportunity that define our markets.”

But he says what is even more dangerous is when organisations operating in Africa rely solely on these incomplete narratives or limited monitoring tools, and they miss critical early warning signals.

“By the time an issue shows up in international news coverage or on the limited social media channels they're monitoring, it's already too late to manage it effectively.”

Early warning signs

He gives the example of a mining sector crisis triggered by labour union activity.

“We provided real-time visibility across local radio coverage, regional newspapers, social media, and community discussions. We identified emerging narratives, tracked sentiment shifts, and isolated misinformation as it spread - enabling the company to respond strategically before the crisis spiralled.

“If they had relied solely on social media monitoring or international news coverage, they would have been responding days behind the actual conversation. That delay could have cost them their social license to operate.”

He says, similarly, in the financial services sector, they have worked with institutions navigating sensitive communications during regulatory changes, economic shifts, and competitive pressures.

“The early warning signals that allowed them to shape narratives proactively came from community radio discussions, regional newspaper coverage, and stakeholder conversations - not from international news or social media trending topics.”



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ESG: Why it matters more than ever

He explains that ESG alignment - Environmental, Social, and Governance - has become critical for fundraising, investment attraction, and maintaining the right to operate in any environment. Investors and stakeholders demand proof of responsible practice.

“But here's the reality: ESG performance isn't measured by what you say in your annual report - it's measured by what communities, regulators, employees, and customers are saying about you.”

Without comprehensive media monitoring, organisations cannot:

- Identify ESG risks early - A community radio discussion about environmental concerns can signal a crisis months before it becomes a protest or regulatory action.
- Demonstrate genuine social license - What are local newspapers saying about your community

engagement? What are regional stakeholders discussing on radio? This is evidence of your actual impact, not your claimed impact.

- Track regulatory sentiment - Government communications, parliamentary discussions, and regulatory commentary often appear in traditional media before official announcements.
- Respond to governance concerns - Employee grievances, union activities and stakeholder criticism often surface in local media before they become crises.

The misconception problem is real. “We’re seeing international investors make decisions based on incomplete information because they’re relying on global news sources that don’t capture local nuance.

“They might read about ‘political instability’ without understanding the specific community dynamics that create opportunity. Or they might miss early signals of labour unrest because it’s being discussed on community radio, not Twitter,” he explains.

Over nearly a decade of providing media intelligence across Southern Africa, he says they have seen this pattern repeatedly.

“Organisations that invest in comprehensive monitoring gain months of strategic advantage over those that don’t. They identify opportunities earlier, manage risks before they become crises, and build stronger stakeholder relationships because they’re actually listening to what’s being said.”

He maintains that an organisation working in Southern Africa without proper media intelligence is making multi-million dollar decisions based on assumptions rather than data.

“In markets this dynamic, that’s not just risky - it’s negligent.”



MARKETING

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A fundamental paradox

He adds that the solution isn’t more monitoring for monitoring’s sake – “It’s comprehensive intelligence that captures the full conversation across the channels that actually matter, delivered in time to inform decision that protect reputation and create competitive advantage.”

He adds, “The media intelligence infrastructure in Africa presents a fundamental paradox: the markets that need it most are the markets where it’s hardest to build.

“But that’s exactly why it’s necessary - and why we’ve spent nearly a decade building expertise in this specific challenge.”

Rather than trying to force African markets into a Western media intelligence model, they have built infrastructure that works with African realities:

- Comprehensive traditional media monitoring because that’s where critical conversations happen when digital fails.
- Strategic digital monitoring that doesn’t rely solely on limited APIs but uses multiple capture methods

- Cross-channel intelligence that connects conversations across radio, print, television, and social media to identify emerging narratives.
- Real-time processing that accounts for power interruptions and connectivity issues.

“We're providing organisations with the data they need to make informed decisions about their reputation, their positioning, and their communications strategies - based on what's actually being said in the channels that actually matter in their markets.”

Fail fast fail forward

He talks of these 3 am mornings - of trading lunches in ice cream containers and wearing his father's old construction shoes – and says they taught him something valuable: “The privilege of "daring to be first" and the resilience that comes from rejection”.

“I believe in "fail fast, fail forward." Every mistake, every rejection, every failed pitch has been a lesson.

“That philosophy has been critical - especially when we had to completely pivot our business model based on what our clients were actually telling us they needed.”

ABOUT DANETTE BREITENBACH

Danette Breitenbach is a marketing & media editor at Bizcommunity.com. Previously she freelanced in the marketing and media sector, including for Bizcommunity. She was editor and publisher of AdVantage, the publication that served the marketing, media and advertising industry in southern Africa. She has worked extensively in print media, mainly B2B. She has a Masters in Financial Journalism from Wits.
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