“Your work has really helped to inform the decisions I have been making and the conversations I have been having with people around the pandemic. It’s hugely important to have publications like yours act as digital lifeboats.”

– Reader
What kept our team going was seeing the direct impact we were having on the daily lives of individual South Africans. Calls flowed into our offices, questions into our email boxes, and message after message was posted to our social media accounts. Readers needed reliable COVID-19 information presented in a way they could easily understand, and we were able to give it.

We amped up our social media channels with digestible bits of deep reporting projects. We turned our platforms into town hall discussions and delivered explainers on everything from vaccine side effects to complex policy concepts. After one explainer series, South Africa’s medicines regulator contacted Bhekisisa for advice on how to break down its vaccine registration processes so journalists could understand it; the health department requested Bhekisisa’s advice regarding the structuring of its national vaccine dashboard.

But one of our highest accolades was from a colleague, one of South Africa’s top investigative journalists, Stefaans Brümmer, the co-founder of the amaBhungane Centre for Investigative Journalism. He told Oxford’s Reuters Institute in a global report about independent media and COVID that because of “very good work done by Bhekisisa” amaBhungane chose not to be at the forefront of pandemic reporting in South Africa.

The pandemic is far from over, and we will feel its repercussions for years. It served to further expose the deep fractures in our health system. But thanks to our readers and our supporters, we’ll keep scrutinising health in South Africa.

– Mia Malan, editor-in-chief, Bhekisisa
“Sadly, I trust no one. My go-to place for leading, reliable, credible, and science-based information has been @Bhekisisa_MG & @miamalan!”

– Reader

“Absolutely brilliant reporting from the entire team, demonstrating that knowledge is power, and access to accurate, non-sensational, scientific driven information is key.”

– Reader
HIGHLIGHTS

The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation recognised Bhekisisa’s COVID-19 reporting with the prestigious 2021 Reconciliation Award.

The Public Health Award of the Charlotte Mannya-Maxeke Institute was presented to Mia Malan for making public health information accessible.

Bhekisisa, in collaboration with Media Hack, received a Vodacom Journalist of the Year commendation for its #SayHerName femicide project.

Our op-ed about the prejudice of the Omicron African travel ban was used by the Canadian High Commission in South Africa to convince its government to drop the ban and was quoted at a World Health Organisation Council meeting to explain why the restrictions were discriminatory and unscientific.

Our data journalism collaboration with Media Hack on a coronavirus dashboard became the go-to source for COVID-19 and vaccine roll-outs on the continent, bringing in nearly 5-million unique visitors.

Our team moderated nine panels, including for UNAIDS High Level Meeting virtual side event on the HIV prevention and the 2021 Nobel-inspired lecture, alongside South Africa’s Salim Abdool Karim and Anders Tegnell, Sweden’s chief epidemiologist.

Bhekisisa journalists were interviewed by nearly 200 international and local media outlets about COVID and vaccine issues.

We contributed the “Pandemics and the Media” chapter for the 2021 book Pandemics and Healthcare, published by Juta, alongside vaccinologist Shabir Madhi; the president of the South African Medical Research Council, Glenda Gray; and bioethics expert Ames Dhai.

Our Wikipedia page went live.
Accurate information is useless if people don’t understand it

In a pandemic, people need to know how to protect themselves, which government rules they need to follow, and what the future holds. That requires more than accurate information; it requires the ability to dejargon science and policies and report issues in an understandable way.

You can’t do it without partners

Our established contacts meant we had health data that many others didn’t. But we didn’t have the resources to turn it into accessible formats. Media Hack, a data journalism start-up, had the expertise but lacked the data. Together we created a COVID dashboard. Meanwhile, Newzroom Afrika offered us a health programme slot, giving them expert health journalists and Bhekisisa a television audience.

You can’t cover everything

There is no way to keep up with all the research during a pandemic. We had to make strategic decisions about what to cover. We stuck with what we do best: deeply reported journalism that makes science easy to understand. We didn’t cover press conferences, live tweeting those instead.
Repurpose stories in every possible format

We produced short videos of constantly moving, in-depth print stories. For example, we took one aspect of a story on vaccine boosters and produced a two-minute video. Not only did this strategy buy our reporters time to dig deeper, but it also helped us to quickly reach a wider, younger audience.

Consistency is the currency of trust

The fast-moving complexity of the pandemic meant we bent a journalistic code to never send interviewees the full text prior to publication. We asked experts to look at our stories if we felt the slightest bit unsure, finding they rarely attempted to take editorial control. Their goal was the same as ours: get accurate information out to the public. It served us, the experts, and our audience.

Embrace new ways of storytelling

Twitter threads can do many things traditional stories can’t. They travel faster, allow for quicker interaction with readers and reach more targeted audiences. Live tweeting during press conferences got essential information out in real time.

Brand-building never stops

Social media helped us get our stories, backed by our brand as a trusted source. To keep this momentum going, we upped our newsletter game, with individual team members sending out newsletters with their photos and personal takes. Why? Because readers want to know our journalists as people.

Brace for attacks

Studies show the best response to misinformation spreaders is to focus on the audience you aim to reach; in the case of vaccines, it is vaccine-hesitant people. Instead of responding to attacks on side effects, our stories reported on the science behind them. When attacked for having the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a donor, which also funds vaccine research, we produced a FAQ sheet to explain our editorial independence policies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Published articles: 174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average page views per month: 394,130**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV programmes produced: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republishing partners:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Maverick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mail &amp; Guardian</td>
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<tr>
<td>News24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Mail</td>
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<td>El País</td>
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<td>Mondial Nieuws</td>
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<td>Newsletters</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subscribers: 3,630</td>
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<td>Average open rate: 32%</td>
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<td>Facebook followers: 8,950</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube subscribers: 6,429</td>
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<tr>
<td>In the News</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhekisisa used as source in other media: 64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhekisisa reporters interviewed for other media: 192</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These figures represent March 2021 – February 2022 figures.
** Readership figures include the Bhekisisa website and readers from republishing partners. These numbers are likely much lower than recorded due to coding issues from some partners.
TOP READ STORIES

→ The joke’s on us, South Africa. The cruel logic of Omicron travel bans – debunked

→ ’Tis the season for a new variant: Your introduction to how quickly Omicron is spreading in SA

→ The 30-day rule: Why you have to wait for a vaccine if you’ve recently had Covid-19

→ A few pills a day could keep severe COVID away: What you need to know about two new treatments

→ Lockdown cheat sheet: Adjusted level 4 extended until 25 July

→ The Pfizer palpitations: What exactly are the risks to teens’ hearts from this COVID vaccine?

→ We say goodbye to South Africa’s ‘people’s doctor’, Sindi van Zyl

→ The 30-day rule: Why you have to wait for a vaccine if you’ve recently had COVID

→ 45.6% of SA adults have been fully vaccinated against COVID

→ How do we know if South Africa is in a third wave — and could there be a fourth?

→ People without medical aid can now do walk-ins at private sites. How does it work?

→ Rise of the variants: What you need to know about the Delta variant in SA

→ Can you still spread the coronavirus after getting a vaccine? Find out
POPULAR ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Need an abortion? Find clinics you can trust here

**Are you a healthcare worker or over the age of 60?**
**THIS IS HOW YOU CAN REGISTER TO GET A COVID SHOT:**

- Online: go to https://sacovi.gov.za
- WhatsApp: text the word ‘Register’ to 0600 123 456 and follow the instructions
- Dial 154847 or your ID number or 1548419 if you don’t have an ID number to register
- In person: You can also register in person at vaccination sites

**SAY GOODBYE TO OUR COVID AND VACCINE MAPS**

1 344 690 fully vaccinated
2 858 603 people received first dose

**% OF ADULTS FULLY VACCINATED**

- Eastern Cape: 23.7%
- Free State: 20.0%
- Gauteng: 15.6%
- KwaZulu-Natal: 18.3%
- Limpopo: 23.1%
- Mpumalanga: 16.4%
- North West: 18.4%
- Northern Cape: 19.4%
- Western Cape: 21.9%
- South Africa: 18.6%

*These only include stories published from March 2021 – February 2022.*
Mia Malan’s op-ed “The joke’s on us, South Africa: The cruel logic about the Omicron travel ban – debunked” accumulated over 150 000 unique views, and she was interviewed more than a dozen times by local and international media. The piece was used to convince the Canadian High Commission to drop the ban and quoted at a World Health Organisation Council meeting to explain why the restrictions were discriminatory and unscientific. Within 10 days of the publication, the UK and Canada dropped their bans; other countries around the world followed soon after.

Health regulator Sahpra used our explainers on the vaccine approval process on their website and asked us for advice on how to better explain this type of information to journalists.

The health organisation TB Proof asked to use our content to explain COVID as part of their social media campaign “Vaccines save lives”.

Bhekisisa’s exclusive South African interview with US infectious diseases expert Anthony Fauci was broadcast on Newzroom Afrika. Almost every major news outlet in the country quoted the interview to help explain how the pandemic was likely to play out.

Mia Malan was one of five useful sources to follow on Twitter for accurate reporting on COVID-19, alongside Linda-Gail Bekker, the co-lead investigator of the Sisonke COVID-19 vaccine trial, and Salim Abdool Karim, the co-director of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa and chair, at the time, of the ministerial advisory committee on COVID-19.

Bhekisisa’s impact and experiences on the media and COVID were widely sought by local and international media development groups, including Oxford’s Reuters Institute, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Internews Network, and the International Center for Journalists.
“Throughout the pandemic, Bhekisisa became the de facto information source for the country. Its impact ranged from international and national policy shifts to better government communications, as well as the daily lives of individual South Africans.”

– Jonathan Jansen, visiting fellow at the National Research Foundation
COMMUNITY AND MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Bhekisisa reporters spoke widely with other journalists and media groups, appeared on panels, and participated in webinars. These were heavily focused on COVID-19 and vaccines but also included health journalism, HIV and Aids, and science communication training sessions. Here are some of the local, regional, and international groups and publications we worked with.

Newzroom Afrika | eNCA | SABC | KykNET | Smile FM
For the Record | RTI TV | Nigeria Central TV | ABC News Australia
Channel 4 News | BBC World | Vox | Galaxy Universal Network TV
TRI Deutsche TV | Nielsen Network | Talk Radio 702 | Cape Talk | Voice of the Cape
SAFM | Kaya FM | Power FM | Metro FM | Jacaranda FM | Capricorn FM
Algoa FM | Salaamedia | Radio Islam International | SABC Radio | Radio Sonder Grense
Spektrum on RSG | UCR FM | Lotus FM | 5FM | Radio 786 | Cii Radio | Chai FM
National Public Radio | Radio France Internationale | Cork’s 96FM
Monocle 24’s The Globalist | Times Radio | Daily Maverick | Mail & Guardian
News24 | Financial Mail | El País | Mondiaal Nieuws | Business Live
News Media Empire

European Federation of Immunological Societies | International Union of Immunological Societies | United Nations High-Level Meeting on Aids
Swedish Embassy | National Research Foundation | Internews Health Journalism Network
Médecins Sans Frontières | Centre for Evidence-based Health Care at the University of Stellenbosch | Code for Africa | World Health Organisation | UN General Assembly | Africa Health Research Institute | Absa | Citibank | Africa Asia
Communications Networks | frayintermedia | International Women’s Media Fund
University of Cape Town | Discovery Foundation
“When this pandemic is over, @Bhekisisa_MG & @miamalan should be given huge awards. For everything. Give them whatever they want! I can’t imagine going through the last 18 months without her/their brilliant and accurate reporting.”

– Reader

“For nine years now, Mia Malan and her colleagues at the Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism have offered us meticulous and excellent research and journalism on health and social justice. Onwards and upwards.”

– Nomboniso Gasa, adjunct professor, School of Public Law, University of Cape Town
Eh!woza

Co-produced videos on how COVID-19, HIV, and TB affect people in Khayelitsha, a large township in Cape Town. Bhekisisa also hosted and mentored two Eh!woza team members, training them on how to produce video stories.

Media Hack

- Partnered on an infographic series on South Africa’s vaccine roll-out.

- Released a weekly update of the number of vaccinations rolled out, with an interactive map that allowed users to find a vaccination site near them.

- Our data package on gender-based violence and femicide in South Africa included an interactive map and an in-depth story; a solutions-focused feature on gender-based violence; and an op-ed on rape and SA’s geography of violence. The story was subsequently published as a chapter in a book called When Secrets Become Stories: Women Speak Out by Sue Nyati.

Newzroom Afrika

Co-produced six episodes of Health Hub. In the first episode, Mia Malan asked Anthony Fauci 18 questions about the COVID-19 pandemic. Subsequent shows discussed making COVID vaccines more accessible; Johnson & Johnson’s slow vaccine delivery; the HIV prevention pill; gender-based violence; long-COVID; and tips on talking to teenagers about sex. This gave Bhekisisa a springboard to start our own, independent television programme, Health Beat.
**FINANCIALS**

**TOTAL REVENUE:**
R6 244 591

**83%**
PROGRAMMES

**17%**
GENERAL & ADMINISTRATION

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**Donors**

**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation:**
R5 439 881

**Individual donations,**
**GivenGain:**
R25 304

**Hivos’s Regional Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Fund:**
R31 891

**Open Society Foundations Public Health Programme:**
R1 322 077

**Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime:**
R37 925

**Canon Collins Education and Legal Assistance Trust:**
R31 891
Bhekisisa also has a part-time accountant and monitoring and evaluation specialist. These team members include those on staff for 2021–2022 financial year.
BOARD MEMBERS

Vinayak Bhardwaj, deputy head of mission, Médecins Sans Frontières South Africa

Nicholas Dawes, executive director, The City

Hoosain Karjieker, chief executive officer, Mail & Guardian

Mia Malan, executive director and editor-in-chief, Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism

Okyerebea Mwaba, general manager, Group Legal, MTN Group

Kanya Ndaki, director of communications, The Aurum Institute

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