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The International
Programme for
the Development
of Communication



Strengthening Independent Media, One Case at a Time: A Handbook for Media Viability

Preview of a forthcoming IPDC knowledge resource

Independent media the world over are facing an existential economic threat, caused in large part by the collapse of their business models, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. But amidst the multiple challenges, some media companies are generating innovative strategies and practices that provide hope.

As the economic situation worsens, independent media must find solutions that allow them to continue providing the news and information essential to democracy and development. In a crisis, news media become even more important as a vector of accurate, verified and independent information, to counter rumour and false news that can have deadly consequences.

As part of a global initiative to strengthen media viability, UNESCO is examining a wide variety of news media strategies and practices, and compiling some of the most promising into a handbook of practices that can be emulated and inspire others.

“Strengthening Independent Media, One Case at a Time” will highlight what selected media companies and organizations are doing to ensure they can continue to fulfill their essential societal role. The handbook is part of a larger UNESCO project, in partnership with the World News Publishers Association, to research the extent of the crisis, consult with stakeholders for solutions, share knowledge between media outlets, and produce policy recommendations to support the viability of the news media.

The project, conducted through UNESCO’s International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC), includes:

- Research focused on 10 countries (Indonesia, Pakistan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Senegal, Nigeria, Namibia, Brazil, El Salvador and Jamaica), led by the Economist Intelligence Unit and drawing on the IPDC’s draft media viability indicators;
- Knowledge exchanges and wider consultations in these 10 countries, to be organized by the NGO, Free Press Unlimited, to help identify best practices and innovations;
- Policy recommendations for Member States and other stakeholders, formulated by UNESCO in collaboration with experts from the International Center for Journalists and Columbia University.

The knowledge gained throughout the initiative inform the case study handbook, as well as the next global edition of UNESCO's World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development, which will be released at UNESCO's General Conference in November 2021.

Here are the summaries of some of the case studies to be included in the handbook:

Strengthening journalism entrepreneurship in Latin America

As the media world changes rapidly, journalism schools find it difficult to keep up. The new, relevant skills journalists need for today's media environment are often missing from the curricula, particular when they concern the economics of journalism. In today's media environment, when jobs are scarce, more journalists strike out on their own, but lack business skills to create their own news enterprises.

Sembra Media in Argentina has first-hand experience with this knowledge gap: one of its founders ran a print magazine while still in university, ultimately struggling to develop a revenue model when newsprint shortages decimated the business and online was the only recourse.



Mijal Lastrebner, Cofounder and Managing Director Sembra Media

That set off a global quest for ideas, ultimately producing a map of interesting online revenue strategies and innovative approaches. And those discoveries are now being shared in a journalism entrepreneurship curriculum to help new journalists get started on the right foot.

The curriculum defines the concept of journalistic entrepreneurship, with examples and case studies, introduces different funding sources, and provides a step-by-step plan for building a concept, developing viable

products and implementing a business plan. It provides needed business expertise to journalists who very often enter the profession for idealistic reasons, focused more on their mission than on making money.

That mission will fail without adequate resources, and the expertise provided by Sembra Media's curriculum is helping to keep emerging enterprises afloat.

One size doesn't fit all: where the advertising business model for media still works

If your view of the media business is centered on Europe and North America – and that would not be surprising, since their large media markets dominate much of the discussion – then you are likely to believe that advertising is no longer providing adequate revenue to sustain media. The other side of the coin: that increasing subscription revenue is the only way to future sustainability.

But if you look at countries where the subscription model isn't an option, the business model is quite the opposite. Media companies that succeed are continuing to win significant advertising revenue despite the looming presence of Google and Facebook, which take the largest share of online advertising elsewhere.



Winston Utomo, Founder and
CEO of IDN Media

IDN Media in Indonesia is a prime example: started in the bedroom of the founder, it blossomed into on-line media company employing more than 500 people that provides not only a wide variety of compelling content, but marketing and support for advertisers who can reach 70 million monthly users. IDN covers news and entertainment, fashion and beauty, parenting, competitive online multiplayer electronic sports (esports) and any other topic whose audience sufficiently attracts advertisers and sponsors. Most importantly, it provides many services for those advertisers that Google and Facebook cannot, such as ensuring that adverts are not placed next to disinformation or hateful content.

South African community media is redefining sustainability

From organizing activities for youth through to paying for funerals, community radio in South Africa is more than just media. It represents everything the term “community” implies. These stations have increased cultural and linguistic diversity in media across the country, embedding themselves in their communities and providing local information and services to those who have little resources and no other independent sources of news.

These broadcast outlets come in all shapes and sizes, from Jozi FM in Johannesburg, which competes with commercial radio, to stations like Radio Riverside in the northern Cape, whose audience loyalty is demonstrated by its 90 per cent listenership in its coverage area, to Ugu Youth Radio in Kwa-Zulu Natal, which is the station that pays for the funerals.

South African community media have a strong support network, but they, like all media, are facing grave challenges to their economic sustainability. Some, like Jozi FM, are self-sustainable, but others must turn to outside sources of income – either revenue provided by the other business resources of their founders and donors, or from the South African Media Development and Diversity Agency, set up by the country’s parliament to support the sector, with safeguards to guarantee independence. The MDDA disburses funds provided through a levy on the annual turnover of commercial broadcasters and from government funding.

The MDDA, however, finds itself often having to re-invest in the same media enterprises. Without such support, many of these small community broadcasters would fail and substantial investments in equipment, training and personnel would be lost. This reduces the MDDA’s ability to aid new community media, and prevents new voices from emerging.



Zukiswa Potye, CEO of MDDA

The MDDA has therefore embarked on an approach to define and examine the factors contributing to sustainability, and to emphasize the underlying business factors of community media. But in this environment, the definition of viability is sometimes different from pure self-sustainability, and takes into account intangible value such as volunteer staffing and the value of subsidies when the market cannot provide, in order to continue the benefits that independent community media brings to societies.

Fact checking, a core skill of news media, emerges as a business strategy

Before there was the term 'fake news', before social media made it easy to spread manipulated content and outright lies, many traditional news media outlets were already employing the fact checking skills that expose propaganda, falsehoods and even honest errors.

Fact checking is in the DNA of professional standards: "if your mother says she loves you, check it out" is the motto that underlies independent and credible journalism. For many reporters and their outlets the world over, fact checking is a way of life.

With the rise of disinformation and misinformation, fact checking is needed more than ever. The unchecked spread of conspiracy theories weakens societies and has even led to riots and added fuel to wars.

Some media companies are discovering they can fulfill a societal need by applying their fact checking skills across the internet, and have found that others are willing to pay for this service.

Some, like Agencia Lupa in Brazil, have built an entire business on it, providing fact checking services for numerous clients, and also teaching citizens to better scrutinize their news. Others are making fact-checking a regular feature in their content offerings as a response to audience desires. The need is growing. To share practices and uphold standards, fact-checkers are coming together in organizations like the International Fact Checking Network, which, among other services, certifies fact-checking organizations and provides guidance to ensure the fact checkers provide honest accounts and aren't themselves manipulated by those who weaponize information.



Cristina Tardaguila, Founder of Agencia Lupa

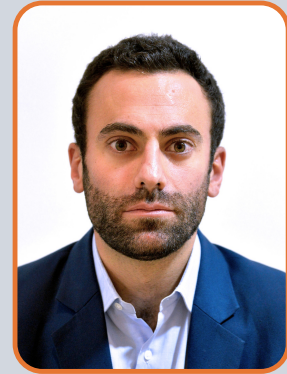
Fact checking is something that reputable news media had always done for free. Now some are being paid for it as a service to social media companies under pressure for profiting from the spread of false content on their sites.

Finding the right niche for digital transformation

Know thyself. That is the first rule in a collapsing media market if you want to stay in business.

For media companies, that means knowing what uniquely defines you and what you can offer to audiences that nobody else can, something that people are willing to pay for.

For Lebanon's L'Orient-Le Jour, that once meant being the country's leading French-language independent newspaper. But the market for most independent news outlets has collapsed for several reasons, and is now heavily dominated by media controlled by political parties or foreign sources.



Michel Helou, Executive Director
of L'Orient-Le Jour

L'Orient-Le Jour realized it would have to remake itself to survive, to become a "third way" -- both financially sustainable and politically independent. The paper aimed to prove it could build a sustainable source of revenue online, providing information that sufficient numbers of people were willing to pay for. To do so, it looked to its core strength as a source of independent news provided by local Lebanese themselves, for an audience that included not only local residents but the vast Lebanese diaspora, as well as governments, think tanks and others for whom credible news about Lebanon and the region is essential.

Building a strong demand for its brand of news, and a limited supply of reliable local sources, the model is working. And L'Orient-Le Jour is now expanding outside of its core French-speaking audience: it recently added an English-language version, increasing its news staff with English language reporters in the process, with ambitions to become the reference source for news in Lebanon – multilingual, independent and a must read for the region.

Investing during a downturn: How the Jang Media Group emerged from the pandemic

For the Jang Media Group of Pakistan, the Covid-19 pandemic was a perfect storm. Circulation of its newspapers plummeted. Advertising disappeared. And with fewer readers and viewers, and less income, sustaining staff levels became untenable.

Worse, the pandemic occurred after the government reduced its advertising on which media had come to rely. And in the midst of the pandemic, the nation's labour relations board ordered an increase in journalists' salaries by no less than 148 per cent.

There is no single, simple path to respond to multiple challenges, or to explain how the Jang Group bounced back and reclaimed much of the lost circulation and advertising revenue. But that indeed is what they did, taking a pro-active, multi-pronged approach to the myriad problems.

It might seem counterproductive to invest during a downturn, but the Jang group put money into advertising and marketing to bring back readers and advertisers, while strengthening the public's perception of the community service role that it plays.



Sarmad Ali, Managing Director
of Jang Media Group

At the start of the outbreak, readers of Jang's print publications canceled subscriptions and avoided newsstands and deliverers, fearful of catching Covid. The Jang Group responded with a series of television commercials about their safety practices and reassuring the public there was no danger from the papers. Circulation rebounded quickly.

When advertising disappeared, the Jang Group turned to the Pakistan Advertising Association to create a series of announcements, carried on local TV, about the relationship among advertisers, local media, readers and society as a whole. They didn't directly ask for advertisers to return immediately, but reminded them the country would recover and to return when it did. Advertising picked back up, despite the continuing crisis and the closure of some businesses.

But perhaps the biggest step was to create an event – National Readership Day – that involved governments and local authorities as well as other media and was designed to remind the public of the value that journalists provide for the public good, particularly in a crisis, and what would be lost if they disappeared. The Jang Group believes the initiative helped to ensure that citizens did not take this public good for granted. The various campaigns had immediate benefits to the company's bottom line, and likely long-term benefits as well.

These are summaries of just some of the cases to be included in **“Strengthening Independent Media, One Case at a Time: A Handbook for Media Viability”**, which will be published in September 2021 and will be available for free on the website of the IPDC.

For more information , contact L.kilman@unesco.org.

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