Independent Media in Exile

Scattered around the world, working in homes or in offices, using websites or shortwave radio or Facebook or the printed word, scores of journalists are living and working in exile from repressive homelands. They are devoting all their available time and resources to sending news and information back into those countries, and telling the rest of the world about what is happening there. Many of them weren’t even journalists until they found themselves in exile; many, in fact, were political activists, and had to learn about concepts such as balance and objectivity as they took on their new work.

Isolated as they generally are from each other, and from their countries, they often go about their mission in very different ways, and it is exceptionally hard to quantify their success—their work is aimed at countries with little or no press freedom.

But their successes are manifold. They include numerous examples, in which the exile organizations have had a direct impact on events in their homelands. Beyond that, many international journalism experts argue the importance of the exile media includes informing the outside world of what’s happening to their countrymen, and nurturing a structure of independent journalism that someday could be re-established at home.

As for their impact, observers point to what may be the ultimate compliment from repressive governments: wave after wave of jamming, filtering, Internet shut-downs, and other forms of cyber attacks aimed to silence the exile media outlets.

They are supported by a broad range of governmental, non-governmental, and private donors, as well as, in many cases, their own personal funds. And in the past few years, there have been efforts to help them meet and coordinate with each other. Each time that has happened, it has energized and inspired the participants.

Any full-scale, ongoing coordination and sharing of ideas and resources, not to mention long-term solution to their challenges, remains very much a work in progress, its ultimate success far from certain. But the practitioners of this independent journalism, as scattered as they are, share a passionate commitment to their cause.

This report offers four recommendations for addressing some of the complex challenges of independent media in exile:

- Donor groups should expand and formalize coordination of their exile-media support. This could solve some of the bureaucratic issues that have caused problems and improve the effectiveness of funding by targeting it more holistically.
Donors should also look for more creative approaches, such as a small-grants program with multiyear funding.

- Organizations providing international media training should actively seek to train exile-media journalists. Training is badly needed, but is not widely enough available—sometimes due to policies of the training organizations themselves.

- A formal international association of exile media should be established. There are professional industry associations nearly everywhere in the world, at all levels of the media, and they provide invaluable services to their members. For this community of journalists, spread far and wide around the world, it could be a godsend.

- The exile-media organizations themselves should take some of the initiative. There’s no doubt that they are strapped for time and resources. But they should take advantage of the network they have gradually been building in recent years, and make their voices heard about what would help them the most.

*Independent Media in Exile* is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA’s work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance. For more information on CIMA, please visit http://cima.ned.org.