

# Publishing for peanuts

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## *Innovation and the Journalism Start-up*

Public version

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By JJ Robinson, Kristen Grennan, Anya Schiffrin  
*Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs*

International Media,  
Advocacy, and  
Communications

IMAC@SIPA

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# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This report was commissioned by OSF's Program on Independent Journalism in May 2015. Our remit was to look for innovative media outlets that are producing high-quality news, that are technologically innovative and that might actually survive financially. Accordingly, we spent three months interviewing media innovators around the world and reading what others have written on the subject.

This report is divided into seven sections: 1) this introduction, 2) our main findings, 3) two sets of recommendations, one for the media development community and another set for people starting a media outlet, 4) an "Innovation Index" listing practices that we found around the world, 5) a description of our methodology, 6) a review of practitioner reports we read, 7) write-ups describing 35 media outlets, based on interviews we conducted. These are listed by their ranking in the 2015 Press Freedom Index ranking by Reporters Without Borders.

## What do we consider a 'journalism startup'?

We included small-to-medium size independent media outlets with a track record of **consistently** producing **credible** content **independently** of state and mainstream media in the countries in which they were operating. 'Startup' is descriptive of their work practices but may be a misnomer; some of those we interviewed have been in operation for many years but may have undergone a relaunch (ie, *Himal Southasian*) or adapted to new circumstances following a political event (ie, *Minivan News*).

## We feel strongly that the research was worth doing.

As the researchers Nicola Bruno and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen<sup>1</sup> note, there is little research on journalism start-ups outside the developed media markets of Europe

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<sup>1</sup> Bruno, Nicola and Nielsen, Rasmus Kleis. 'Survival is Success: Journalistic Online Start-ups in Western Europe' Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2012

and the US. There is not much academic literature on the topic. Nor is there sufficient practitioner literature that truly describes the nuances and conditions facing a start-up media outlet in the developing world.

The challenges to media development in the developing world are many and well known. Mexico, Colombia and Brazil remain the most dangerous ‘peacetime’ countries for journalists, with death tolls approaching those of major war zones<sup>2</sup>. Poor infrastructure (roads, cable, internet) inhibits distribution in countries of vast and uncompromising geography. Immature advertising markets threaten the viability of conventional business models, and lack of access to training and talent undermines the quality and credibility of editorial content. On the other hand, the bane of the saturated media markets of the developed world—apathy—is less common in places where being well informed is a need rather than a luxury. This offers hope for quality media start-ups, even as they find financial survival difficult.

### **We were inspired.**

We were inspired and encouraged by what we saw. All over the world, independent media outlets are innovating and overcoming obstacles. Globally, start-ups are demonstrating the drive to take risks for the sake of a good idea. **The challenges facing these outlets—and the innovations employed to tackle them—broadly fall into four categories: editorial, business, distribution and security.** Operating with agility, media start-ups are finding creative ways to gather and disseminate information. In India, *Gram Vaani* uses a mobile phone social network to connect the rural poor and circumvent legislative prohibitions on radio broadcasting. In Zimbabwe, *The Source* survives in the repressive media climate by focusing on business journalism. *Oxpeckers* in South Africa uses geomapping to report on rhino poaching. *Crikey* in Australia has built a successful business model based on soliciting tips and scandal from the same audience it reports on and Kenya’s *African SkyCAM* deploys drones to avoid negotiating with police for access to disaster zones.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘1141 Journalists Killed since 1992’, Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/killed/>, last accessed 17 Aug 2015

## **There isn't one single model.**

With all this creativity and tenacity comes diversity. No two innovators were the same or even close to being the same. We were surprised by what we found. We carried out interviews with more than 35 innovators around the world, expecting to be able to draw conclusions about their common traits. We had hoped to create a data set of which innovations work and which do not, and what elements the successful outlets share. To our surprise—and disappointment—we were unable to come up with a list of traits that crossed borders and different kinds of outlets. Each was rooted in its home market. Undoubtedly this understanding of local needs is essential to their survival.

Instead of finding a clear model for what works, we found confirmation of many things we knew or suspected. Independent media outlets vary in size, ambition and model. Few have fully succeeded, while **many do one thing well, which typically reflects the founder's particular strength—usually in journalism or technology**. Michael Massing's *New York Review of Books* series on US digital news sites came out just as we were beginning our research<sup>3</sup>. Massing concluded that the quality of journalism he saw did not match the technological innovation of the platform. We might put it another way: Of the three key properties we focused on—technological innovation, news quality and financial sustainability—we found most news outlets to be good at one, but not all three.

**Most media outlets we found are small, run by a few full-time staff supplemented by volunteers and freelancers, and supported by a combination of grants, donations and haphazard business endeavors. The leaders at most organizations we interviewed were motivated by a desire to produce high-quality journalism rather than meet particular financial or audience goals.**

The vast majority are overworked, with a belief in the value of good journalism that motivates them beyond financial reward. Many of the founders have put their own money into their outlet (and that of their friends and relatives) and many asserted that merely surviving financially amounts to success. While undoubtedly praiseworthy, this emphasis on pure content means that startlingly

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Massing, "Digital Journalism: How Good Is It?" *New York Review of Books*, June 4, 2015 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/jun/04/digital-journalism-how-good-is-it/> and Michael Massing, "Digital Journalism: The Next Generation," *New York Review of Books*, June 25, 2015 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/jun/25/digital-journalism-next-generation/>

few organizations have the skills in business development, marketing, administration or even basic bookkeeping needed for any company to thrive. Should any of them decide to expand, their founders may end up being replaced.

The lack of business expertise is common says Ross Settles, Senior Advisor for Digital Media at the Media Development and Investment Fund (MDIF). A former ad man, Settles works on business development with MDIF's clients, including success stories like *Malaysiakini*. "It is very rare for an independent media outlet to launch with a full team of editors, marketing and ad sales people," says Settles. Where these skills are present, they have usually been picked up by founders or senior staff as a matter of necessity and are vested in one particular person... They have not built an institution, but rather organized around that person's ability to fund them. So much of the media development you see is not institution building. It is journalistic and content support.

**It is well known that we are living in a golden age of new, innovative media.**

It's well known that media blossoms during times of political upheaval or technological innovation, and we are living in a period of both. In the 1960s and 1970s, small alternative weeklies blossomed in the US. Numerous countries under political transition—such as Indonesia after Suharto, Ghana after Rawlings, France after World War II, Spain after Franco, and Egypt after Mubarak—saw many new newspapers and other outlets spring up. Most of these did not survive.

Today's start-ups benefit from donor funding and an enormous reservoir of talent, as experienced journalists from established media houses leave their employers or get laid off and then start their own sites, often teaming up with young, tech-savvy journalists. Their innovations spur large media houses to compete by fostering their own innovation efforts in house; *The New York Times'* focus on data-visualization and video is just one example. **The result is a world teeming with start-ups, apps and new ideas.** As we know, this trend may not last or spread. The low barriers to entry today mean that there are many small outlets which will go out of business or remain small.

Indeed, **there is reason to believe that consolidation is imminent.** A study of 89 financial newspapers founded in England between 1879 and 1915 found that 67%



failed within two years and only five survived more than ten years<sup>4</sup>. Today, as advertising rates fall and audience attention spans shrink, it is safe to assume that most new outlets will not grow and probably won't live very long. Confirmation bias, however, means that we will remember those that do make it.

**One person or one small outlet can have an impact. Success is not necessarily linked to size or market dominance.**

While it's not clear what kinds of technology or funding models will appear in the future, **history shows that the model of a crusader with a newsletter is an enduring part of the journalism ecosystem.** There are endless examples of idealists who set up news outlets to investigate or cover a single subject. Many were journalists who left a large institution in disgust and in search of more freedom to write and publish. Some were laid off or pushed out. In other cases, the lone crusader was not a journalist but was moved to become one. Still other innovators were motivated not by the desire to change the world but by a business opportunity they saw and decided to pursue. History repeatedly shows that small media outlets can accomplish great things and have impact even if they don't last for decades. **Even when the outlets don't endure, the reporters often move elsewhere and so keep spreading ideas and lessons learned.** Many of our interviewees are examples. Lina Atallah (Egypt) has worked at outlets that have failed but is now starting a new one. Natalia Viana (Brazil) went from being a well-known blogger to co-directing a news start-up.

### **Political transition, reader demand and market necessity spur start-ups**

In some cases, enterprising journalists took advantage of openings created by external processes: political change (such as the upheavals of the Arab Spring and the Anna Hazare anti-corruption movement in India), new laws, or financial pressures (such as shifting audience demand, falling advertising revenues, or a drop in donor grants). Organizations that innovate in order to solve their problems often seem to succeed. For example, *RootIO* in Uganda broadcasts radio programs over mobile phone using a callback system that makes it free for the end users, circumventing poor internet and print distribution infrastructure. And

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<sup>4</sup> James Nye "Booms, Crisis, Bust: Speculators, promoters and city journalists 1880-1914" in *The Media and Financial Crises: Comparative and Historical Perspectives* (pp 215-227). Edited by Steve Schifferes and Richard Roberts. Routledge, 2015, London.

in Mexico, a digital news outlet called *Horizontal* is diversifying its revenue by launching a cultural center, complete with an attached coffee shop. *Himal Southasian* magazine, based in Nepal, has introduced a “membership” model to circumvent Nepalese regulation, which demands that non-profit organizations seek government permission for every foreign donation, no matter how small. The survival of these outlets may lie in the fact that they saw a need and decided on a path that would meet that need.

**We suspect that donor-led innovations are less likely to spread than innovations that arise from a particular need or market opening.**

Many innovations—like those prompted by the Knight News Challenge—arise for the sake of a grant rather than a newsroom need. For example, a fancy data analysis tool, introduced because of a grant and before a newsroom’s staff can figure out how to make the most of it, tends not to be widely adopted beyond the grant period. To some extent this is a natural part of the process of invention and diffusion but it’s worth trying to avoid spending too much money on what may become “abandonware.”

## II. MAIN FINDINGS

We did not find any single groundbreaking innovation that is turning the world upside down. The likes of YouTube and Facebook are exceptions. **The innovations we saw tended to be incremental and based on many practices that are familiar around the world but have been adapted, exported or developed in one place or another.**

**Much innovation seemed to be event-driven—a property that we observed in 20 percent of our case studies.**

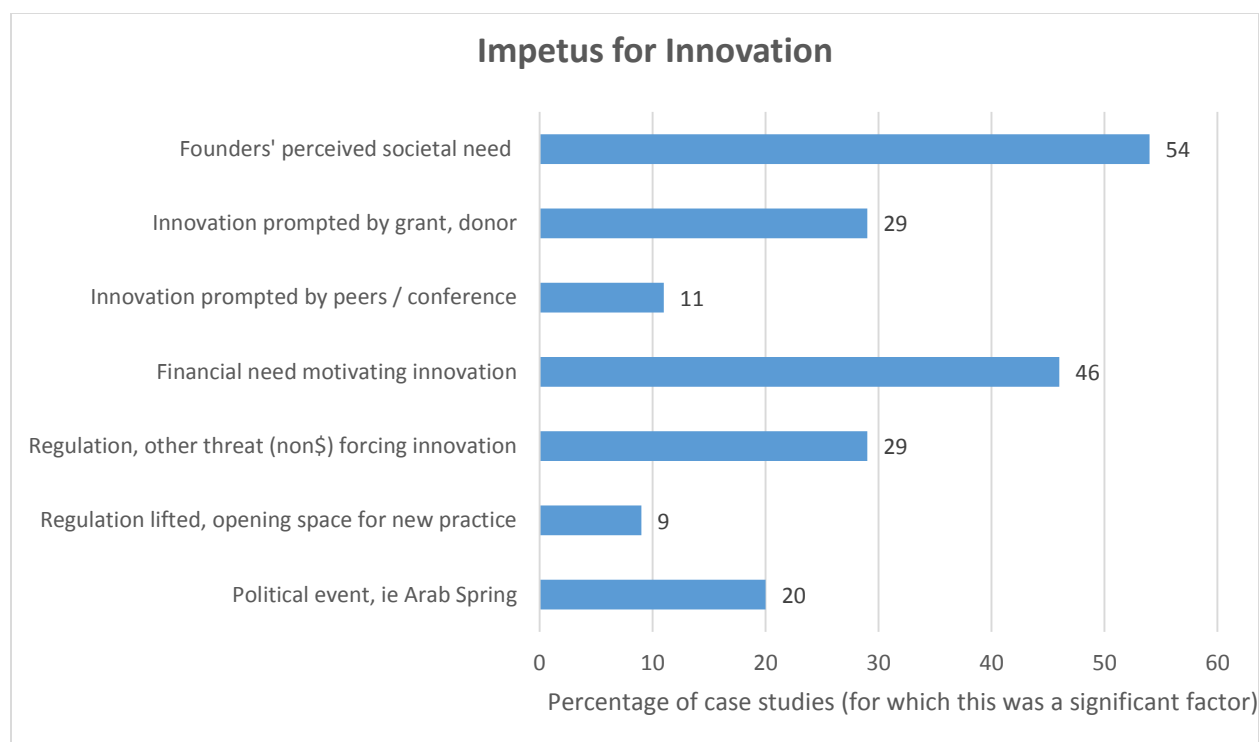
For example, the Arab Spring produced a boom in freedom of expression across the Middle East, creating enormous audiences for the platforms that were designed to serve it. And in India, the data journalism outlet *Indiaspend* was launched in the wake of the anti-corruption movement that was spearheaded by Anna Hazare.

Other times, donor funding played a role. Established publications, like *Ziber* in Jordan, which had relied on conducting sporadic training workshops for funding suddenly found themselves extremely popular with donors, in large part due to their established credibility and preexisting relationships.

Innovation in business models seems to occur quite separately from innovation in content. However, where they do meet, there is real opportunity—as in the market for pre-roll advertising on video. The 2014 CPM rates for video reached an average of \$24.60, compared to traditional display advertising at \$1.90 (mobile ads did scarcely better, at \$3.00).<sup>5</sup> At 20 times the revenue and growing, it's obvious where the commercial imperative lies. Online video's innate shareability across language barriers also makes it attractive to outlets with news agency ambitions, as footage can be readily captioned. Accordingly, many media outlets have jumped into video, including, for example, *The New York Times* and *Vice*.

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<sup>5</sup> '2014 Forecasts: Global Ad Dollars Surge, Driven By Mobile, Social', Ad Exchanger, <http://adexchanger.com/agencies/2014-forecasts-global-ad-dollars-surge-driven-by-mobile-social/>, last accessed 8/27/2015



## Innovation is as much ideological as it is financial.

**Some 54 percent of the organizations we surveyed said they were launched because of a founder's desire to meet a perceived societal need**, such as helping clamp down on rhino poaching in South Africa (*Oxpeckers*). A typical attitude was that of *Liberacion*, a photo magazine in the Mexican city of Acapulco which is one of the world's most violent: "We want to break taboos about reporting on corruption and have real quality journalism," said founding editor Pedro Pardo.

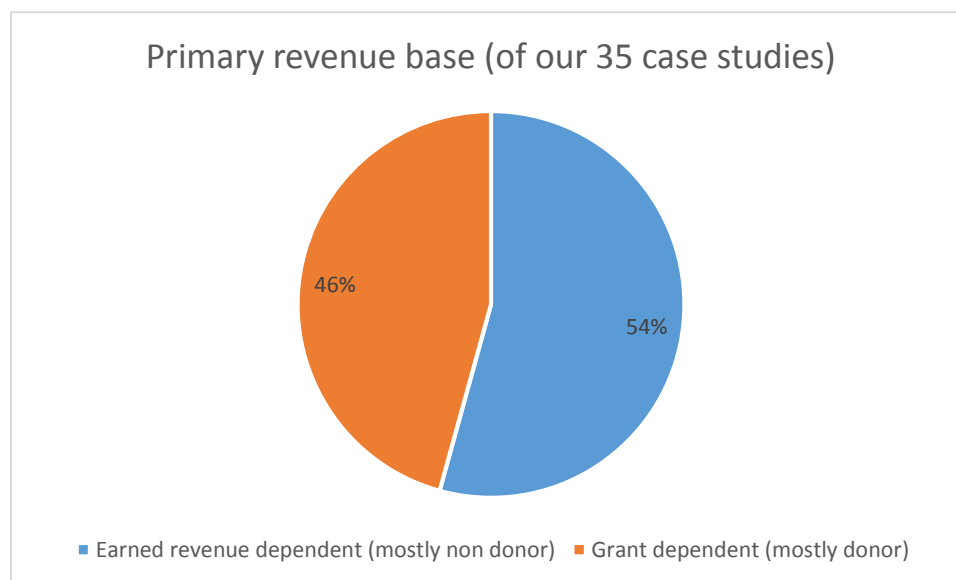
**Financial need was the second most common driver of innovation, noted as key to 46 percent of our case studies.** The vast majority of these particular innovators were those with a model based on earned revenue rather than donor support. *Malaysiakini's* plunge into what would become a successful paywall model began out of necessity, explains co-founder Premesh Chandran: "We weren't selling ads, and we weren't earning money, so [risking a lower readership] didn't make a difference. We didn't have any choice; we needed a revenue scheme, or we were going to have to close shop."

The people we interviewed for our case studies – even those with a for-profit model – were idealistic and focused on editorial and did not seem motivated by

the desire for wealth. Indeed, financial success is incidental to the outlets we spoke with. The goals of the founders are to survive, to provide independent reporting and to expand their coverage and audience<sup>6</sup>. “You can’t have financial success without editorial success,” was typical of the sentiment, voiced by Rita Varela of the successful Mexican online news site *SinEmbargo*.

**Interestingly, regulatory restrictions and other non-financial threats were the motivating innovation among 29 percent of our case studies.**

In some cases, government pressure on mainstream media impels media start-ups innovate to circumvent repressive regulation. *Gram Vaani* originally developed open source software to help community radio stations run cheaply and efficiently. However the Indian government’s restrictions on community broadcasting – including heavy licensing fees and bans on news – prompted *Gram Vaani* to develop a new method of mobile phone broadcasting which not only circumvented these laws, but also reached deep into areas of rural India with no access to any other media. Likewise, *Malaysiakini* only launched as a website in 1999 because the Malaysian government refused to give it a newspaper license. Now that it is in possession of a successful business model and the attention of at least 13 percent of the Malaysian electorate, the government can do little to oppress it apart from the occasional lawsuit.



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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, many founders spoke of working unpaid for years.

## Successful independent media organizations find a niche, become the experts.

The ‘single subject’ news model was a notable trend in the media practitioner literature summarized later in this report, and came up repeatedly in our interviews. In fact, expert domination of a niche—be it a subject (say, organized crime or judicial affairs), a country (Syria), or a region (Pacific Northwest USA)—appeared to be the single most significant indicator of an outlet’s success and sustainability. Niche expertise plays to the particular strengths of many independent media models: a passion for content and an ability to cover a subject underserved by mainstream media. Lara Setrakian, founder of the *News Deeply* series of sites that seek to commoditize this model, suggests that such narrow targeting can “dramatically raise the supply of high-quality journalism, covering complex and chronic issues that are widely neglected in mainstream media.”<sup>7</sup>

The greater sustainability of the niche model appears to come in part from greater commercial viability—a formula no more mysterious than supply and demand. As explained by Felipe Seligman, a veteran reporter in Brazil and now CEO of *Jota*, a paywalled site covering the country’s judiciary: “It is much easier to sell content to a specific public who are more willing to pay for information of high quality about a topic that really interests them.”

Examples abound. *The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* (OCCRP), the only investigative reporting network focused on organized crime and corruption, is based in Eastern Europe and supports 160 journalists. Their work has borne remarkable results: law enforcement agencies have frozen or seized more than \$1.3 billion in assets, tax authorities have found \$600 million in hidden assets, and authorities have shut down more than 2,500 companies. Because of the impact of its reporting, OCCRP’s expenditure will grow to \$2.4-2.5 million in expenditure next year, 97 percent of it funded by grants.

Another successful niche-theme website is *Guokr*, a Chinese science and technology publication. According to *Guokr*’s Editor in Chief Ou Wu: “We are aiming to improve Chinese scientific literacy.” *Guokr* has become a leading source for science and technology news in China, with 10 million followers on Weibo, 1.3 million followers on Weixin, 3.5 million app users, and 3 million registered users

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<sup>7</sup> Nolan, Kristin and Setrakian, Lara. “Seeking the Single Subject News Model,” Tow Center for Digital Journalism, December 2014 <http://towcenter.org/research/seeking-the-single-subject-news-model/>

on its own website. The current fixed costs for running the organization are 20 million Yuan (approximately \$3.2 million), and the budget is balanced due to profits and investments.

### **Credibility can be a market niche.**

The niche approach can work in places where demand for better information is high, such as countries that have experienced a democratic event like the Arab Spring or where mainstream media is considered corrupt or subverted by the authorities. In these kinds of environments, news outlets can effectively turn credibility into a market niche. *Mada Masr*, for example, focuses on Egyptian news and is one of the few surviving independent news outlets in Egypt. According to its founder and Editor in Chief Lina Attalah, “We founded *Mada Masr* to preserve the practice of independent media at a time when journalism structures were becoming increasingly scarce.” Recognizing the need for independent coverage of Egyptian news, *Mada Masr* has carved a successful niche for itself. Similarly, *Minivan News* was able to exploit the lack of independent media in the Maldives following the country’s democratic revolution in 2008, establishing itself as the definitive source on the archipelago’s fractious politics for much of the international community.

One hypothesis, noted repeatedly in much of the literature on journalism in emerging, transitional and contested democracies, is that in places with a legacy of poor reporting and untrustworthy propaganda, credible and reliable information is in high demand. This can be hard to appreciate from inside a developed media environment where the market for credible journalism is saturated. Good journalism may indeed sell in markets where it is currently hard to find. Ideally, an independent, financially sustainable media outlet would train, fund and protect journalists in perpetuity, long after donor funding runs out. Donors are still important, but independent media is making money in many different ways, while keeping costs low.

### **Donors currently demand financial sustainability.**

The media development sector is shaped by trends as much as any other industry—and financial sustainability is the trend of recent years. Independent media outlets being supported by donors were told to regard this funding as seed

money, with the ultimate goal of sustaining themselves through income earned from business activity. Older outlets used to receiving regular checks were encouraged to switch from a focus on pure editorial and adapt to these demands, to compete in the market. This assumption belied the immaturity of the advertising sector in many developing countries, but the message was received. “A subscription a day keeps the donor away,” reads a sign above the desk of Aunohita Mojumdar, the editor of *Himal Southasian*, a long-form magazine which has navigated donor politics for 28 years—at times barely.

“Independent media can be extremely commercially successful but not always,” Mojumdar said. “Donors are willing to give a lot of money to media development organizations for workshops, conferences and seminars, but they seem very unwilling to give the money to actual media organizations, even if these are publishing against the commercial market approach. Ours is not a recipe for a mass product, and the whole reason for *Himal*’s approach is that there’s too little of it.” Uncertainty over donor commitment is driving many independent media outlets to try diversifying their revenue streams. For example, the Egyptian independent news outlet *Mada Masr* is seeking to “move away from anchor investors who can pull the plug at any minute or influence the editorial policy of our coverage.”

One example of an outlet that has diversified its revenue sources is South Africa’s *Daily Maverick*. Although it relies heavily on advertising as its main source of revenue, Styli Charalambous, Publisher and Chief Expense Officer, noted that “The value of online advertising is very low despite high consumption of online media”—a problem by no means confined to South Africa. To compensate, *Daily Maverick* gains revenue by hosting events and conferences, syndicating content, publishing books, lending its brand to other publishers for business directories, and running a production company developing multimedia for corporations.

Outlets with high levels of skill and credibility among their founding members, like *Ziber* in Jordan, earn an income not through content but by conducting multimedia, citizen journalism and social media workshops for development NGOs on a consultancy basis. A four-day commitment of a senior journalist can earn the publication \$6,000, noted *Ziber* co-founder Lina Ejeilat. Although she sometimes questions the impact of this training—“many people come just for the certificate”—she said that demand from NGOs is so high that *Ziber* must turn



down offers to ensure continued supply of its own editorial. iHub in Kenya, while not a publication per se, monetizes a similar approach, developing a reputation for tech sector expertise centered around a physical space for events. In the US, *InvestigateWEST* crowdfunds journalists for specific reporting projects. In Australia, *The Conversation* partners with universities to make academic content accessible to a general audience (target reading level: a 16-year-old), while the Indian open data journalism website *IndiaSpend* keeps it simple with a “donate” button.

Nearly all interviewees emphasized the need to keep costs down, and did this in different ways. Ejeilat noted that *Ziber’s* founders drew a salary only when money was available. *Himal* reduces marketing costs through in-kind subscription and advertising arrangements with other publications in South Asia, while another outlet made its foreign staff sleep in the office to avoid having to rent a second premises (average retention nonetheless ranged from six months to a year). Use of voluntary contributions is common though it is hard for volunteers to sustain their interest and energy.

**Media in the developing world is not vastly different from the developed, making good ideas exportable in both directions.**

Media in the developing world spans a variety of networks and platforms, making the most of what new technology offers. Its particular challenges, such as those involving distribution, create a crucible of innovation. At the same time, ideas and innovations used to sustain media in the developed world—particularly, business models and editorial practices that build public trust, credibility and a culture of good journalism—can be applied to supporting media in emerging democracies.

In writing up our case studies, we noted that independent media outlets face many similar challenges regardless of where in the world they are located. Trends such as the spread of mobile internet (a distribution challenge), donor pressure to achieve sustainability (a business challenge), or preference to fund topics rather than institutions (an editorial challenge) seem universal.

**One common dilemma is how to best exploit social media to grow and engage an audience.** Utilized effectively, social media can help mitigate the size advantage of mainstream media over smaller but more dynamic outlets. Nearly

all the media outlets we looked at are active on social media, most significantly Facebook and Twitter. We note that many of our case studies were using social media to particular effect in the developing world, engaging and enticing new readers.

The Editor In Chief of the Egyptian independent online news outlet *Mada Masr*, Lina Attalah, said Facebook is the single greatest driver of traffic to their website: “We’re reaching the audience we need by being online.” Prachi Salve, an analyst and writer at the data-driven news site *IndiaSpend*, noted that an organization’s ability to use social media effectively “depends on who you are trying to reach. Data is big with techies and the middle class, who are all on Twitter—and that is why it works for us.”

Other challenges are familiar too. As media outlets in the developed world struggle to diversify sources of revenue in response to new pressures of the Internet age, so too are **outlets in the developing world diversifying in order to survive financially**, though not necessarily as a result of the same pressures. Many of the publications we interviewed in Mexico, for example, spoke of the need to avoid taking advertising from local government lest it be used to corrupt and control editorial policy. Other business challenges were more universal. The Publisher of *The Daily Maverick* Styli Charalambous observed that “the state of digital media is out of sync with consumption: the value of online advertising is very low despite high consumption of online media.” Anyone who has tried to make an independent media outlet survive on a Google AdSense CPM, regardless of geography, is probably inclined to agree.

**The fact that so many challenges faced by media start-ups around are similar suggests that solutions could be similar, too.** The emphasis of some donors—particularly PIJ and the Media Development and Investment Fund (MDIF)—on providing ancillary knowledge (such as business development assistance) to emerging media outlets was praised by recipients. Moreover, interviewees told us that they learned from other independent organizations through meetings organized and funded by donors—such as a 2013 OSF-sponsored trip to visit the *Texas Tribune* and study its not-for-profit revenue model, which our interviewees enthusiastically endorsed. The power of “cross-pollination” between independent media outlets is not to be underestimated, though in practice it is usually a

byproduct of in-person interactions such as workshops and conferences and is dependent on a third party funding the logistics.

Although they may seem isolated, particularly at the coalface in their respective countries, **independent news organizations are often hungry to learn from each other.** “On a day-to-day basis, it is very hard to conduct exchanges between small organizations like ours,” explained *Himal*’s Mojumdar. “Most of us are overworked, desperately playing catch-up. Even if we had the money to visit the *Texas Tribune* ourselves, I would not know who to ring, where to go, or how to bring people together. We learned so much talking to each other. Hearing *Malaysiakini* talk about their subscription paywall was as important for us as visiting the *Texas Tribune*.”

Shortly after that visit, *Himal* introduced a membership model based on that of the *Texas Tribune*. It proved that a business innovation can be as simple as a change in terminology: using the word “memberships” rather than “donations” circumvented the bureaucratic requirement of individually seeking permission from the Nepalese government for every foreign donation, regardless of size.

### **Innovations are not necessarily exciting, trendy, or even focused on tools.**

Asked what they needed, none of the editors we interviewed replied “another way to scrape Twitter.” Many of their most effective innovations were not specific tools, but simple processes, mundane in comparison to the exotic and complex technologies that receive all the accolades (and, a cynic might suggest, funding). Tools and technology are often overemphasized at the expense of strategies that can be just as effective, if not more, at helping an organization be sustainable.

Journalism, its confidence shaken, has lately seemed to prioritize technology as the panacea to all editorial problems. Extravagant investment in tools and technology has spawned what Jonathan Stray and Drew Sullivan of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project describe as “beautiful solutions in search of a problem.” They noted that “many small grants for technology development have led to many new tools, but very few have become widely used. For example, there are now over 70 tools just for social network analysis. There are other tools for other types of analysis, document handling, data cleaning, and on and on.

Most of these are open source, and in various states of completeness, usability, and adoption.”<sup>8</sup>

Many successful innovations we observed were old ideas reimagined in a new context. Australian alternative news source *Crikey.com*, for instance, profits by selling subscriptions to a gossip email newsletter that reports on the upper echelons of Australia’s political, business and media sectors—and is considered a must-read among this particular audience.

### **The relationship to technology and data journalism is different across outlets, platforms and countries.**

The broad consensus among our subjects was that technology should serve content, rather than the other way around. *InvestigateWEST* in the US Pacific Northwest resisted pressure to develop a branded app because of the ongoing maintenance needed across multiple platforms. “We didn’t think it was the best use of resources,” said Associate Director Jason Alcorn.

Our subjects occasionally muttered the phrase “data journalism” with a pause, as if in fear of insulting a sacred cow. Some use data quite innovatively; *Oxpeckers* in South Africa uses government data to map incidents of rhino poaching. However, such cases depend on obtaining reliable data sets in the first place. US government agencies make a large amount of high-quality data available, but this is not the case in many developing countries, where the little data that is collected is often unreliable and not made public. Chris Csikszentmihalyi of the *RootIO* project in Uganda summarized the problem by observing that data programs were being run by the development community in an apparent desire “to replicate what is happening in Silicon Valley without paying attention to the government and NGO data that is actually being produced.” Data-driven investigative journalism was simply not an option for the majority of our case studies.

Technology can certainly be deployed for the purposes of data collection as well as story telling and dissemination. *African SkyCAM*, for example, has become

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Stray and Drew Sullivan, “Deploying data mining in cross-border investigative journalism,” Organized Crime and Corrupting Reporting Project, <https://www.occrp.org/en/announcements/3959-deploying-data-mining-in-cross-border-investigative-journalism>, last accessed 18 Aug 2015

known for its use and advocacy of drones in journalism. (Using a drone to take footage of a flood disaster zone avoids the need to negotiate access to the area with uncooperative police, for example.) *Eyewitness News* has become the first outlet in South Africa to use WhatsApp to communicate with its readership. According to Deputy News Editor Camilla Bath, “the response has been great. ... You create a community. People see you as a person or entity rather than a service.” Such examples defy the idea that large organizations are always lumbering and conservative. In fact, they often have more money and clout and so can take risks to pursue a large story agenda that a smaller, more budget-conscious outlet can not cover. The role *The Guardian* played in both the Wikileaks and Snowden stories is a good example, as is formidable investigative reporting still being done by *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

# III. RECOMMENDATIONS

## For journalism entrepreneurs

### 1. Figure out what you are trying to do

Ask yourself what the purpose of your outlet is. What information is missing in the market and what will you provide that is different and that people will pay for? Look at who the competitors are and what are the barriers to entry. Try and think of how you will differentiate yourself from others in the same field.

### 2. Figure out how you will do it and what your content strategy is

When you start something new you need to know how you will execute it. How much of your content needs to be original? How often will you publish new information and how will it be disseminated? Do you have enough contributors and expertise to come up with new content on a regular basis?

### 3. Expand your focus beyond pure editorial

Many journalists have a tendency to focus exclusively on content. Separate and carefully examine the **editorial, distribution, business** and **security** aspects of your outlet. What are the challenges facing each of these, and how do you plan to overcome them? Producing more content won't fix matters if your business model is broken or a belligerent government shuts you down. Understanding the real problem at hand is often the first challenge towards solving it, and may require a degree of honesty and self-reflection (or a second, impartial, opinion).

### 4. Research your audience and what the market will support

It can be tempting for a content-focused journalist, inspired by passion for a particular subject, to write under the optimistic assumption that an audience will be gripped by similar passion and quickly reward the venture

with subscriptions and page views. An honest assessment of the needs of the audience and the outreach efforts required to grow it can make for a stronger, more engaged and more sustainable outlet with a greater chance of long-term survival. In many situations donors may have different priorities from those of an audience, leading an outlet over time to reach the point where the donor agency becomes the primary audience. This is a vulnerable position to be in when the moment comes to pursue future grants.

## **5. Different markets and countries tolerate different models**

This might seem contrary to the spirit of innovation, but expecting audiences to change their habits to meet the revenue needs of a publication is unrealistic. Paywalls don't seem to work very well currently in South Asia, for instance, where a physical product is valued more than perhaps the US or UK. The reason for this may be cultural, or it could be lack of access to online payment services – but it would nonetheless be a brave publication to take the first step down this path.

## **6. Make sure your core team has complementary skills and strengths.**

Having too many people who are good at one thing can lead to turf battles and a lack of skills in a crucial area. It's tempting to hire people like you, but having a balanced core team will help ensure that you have all the skills your organization needs to survive.

## **7. Honestly appraise your weaknesses, and compensate for them**

Good journalists many not always make good managers (and often make lousy salespeople), as the destructive office politics of several large donor-backed investigative journalism projects in the US have demonstrated. Running even a small outlet requires many skills that may be unfamiliar and even distasteful to the editorially-inclined – bookkeeping, sales, web development. Find and utilize resources and the skills of others to compensate for your own shortcomings – and understand that accountants, salespeople and admin staff may be driven by motivations other than raw passion for a topic.

## 8. Find a niche and own it

Successful independent media outlets overwhelmingly appear to have identified a niche and made it their own. This can be a locality (ie *InvestigateWEST* covering the US Pacific Northwest), a subject (*News Deeply's* Syria site), or theme (*EcoBusiness* and climate change). In an emerging democracy with a history of media repression and no prior culture of independent journalism, even the concept of **credibility** can be a market niche – where the demand for trustworthy information is not being met, providing this has a value. So might a broad concept such as ‘issue-based journalism’ or ‘news analysis’ in a market where mainstream media focuses on the specifics of day-to-day events. Competing with such outlets to try and cover every road accident when you have a fraction of the staff is counterproductive when the unreported issue may be why so many accidents are happening in the first place.

## 9. Free content is great – when you get it. Paying for it (however little) gives you the consistency needed to run a business.

A surprising number of journalism startups base their initial model on the assumption that a community will be readily engaged to contribute high-quality content for free. ‘Citizen journalism’ was much in vogue among but outlets that started on this premise and that still survive (such as Jordan’s *Ziber* founded in 2007) have learned to temper their idealism and expectations. Relying on unpaid contributions from concerned citizens can work, but usually takes many years, tends to revolve around the success of a particular platform (ie, a blog), and meets a very specific audience need (such as an underserved language).

Instead, even a token sum offered to contributors inspires respect and loyalty, and offers the consistency needed to both develop writers and run a business. Consistency is often underrated by those who consume an outlet’s content infrequently – but veterans of daily news outlets with mouths to feed and advertisers to placate, will on a day-to-day basis value the consistently average reporter above the troubled and inconsistent genius.



## **10. Utilize existing resources, networks and peers**

Even our limited pool of case studies suggest that problems faced by independent media outlets are rarely unique – usually, somebody or some publication somewhere has tackled them with a degree of success. NGOS and foundations with a stake in media development often have institutional knowledge they may not make immediately accessible, but can be followed like a trail of breadcrumbs through their various projects and public reports. A plethora of free tools are available for most of the common problems, particularly those relating to security, with many donors investing heavily in their creation only to fail to signal their existence beyond the lifespan of the grant. Peer networks (even in other countries), though difficult to establish, can provide a ready source of practical advice.

## **11. Don't become so focused on the grind that you neglect wider business development**

This is by far the most difficult concept for many senior managing editorial staff. The pressure of deadlines and the day-to-day challenge of journalism can quickly lead to a habit of 'working harder, not smarter'. Changing and optimizing components of a system once running can seem an overwhelming task in the face of a daily news cycle and need to 'feed the beast'. Those editors who manage this successfully talk of sacrificing chunks of their working week to tasks such as outreach, development, updating workflows, special projects and other less immediately 'mission critical' components of the operation.

## Further resources

The following is a list of sources supplying an array of material helpful for the frontline development of independent media. The resources available through the links below include guides, reports, publications and articles, between them cover the editorial, business, distribution, and security elements of running a media outlet. Our list is by no means exhaustive, and we have erred towards the practical in our selection.

There is much material freely available aimed at the support, training and development of independent media. Unfortunately much of it is scattered, duplicated and can be hard to find unless you specifically know what you are looking for. A comprehensive listing that reviews and ‘signposts’ the best material available, categorised by the problems it aims to solve, would be a useful resource but is beyond the scope of this report.

- Open Society Foundation Program on Independent Journalism: Articles and resources  
[https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/termsearch/7430/?f\[0\]=type%3Ablog\\_entry&f\[1\]=type%3Aevent&f\[2\]=type%3Awork\\_product&f\[3\]=field\\_taxonomy\\_issues%3A26](https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/termsearch/7430/?f[0]=type%3Ablog_entry&f[1]=type%3Aevent&f[2]=type%3Awork_product&f[3]=field_taxonomy_issues%3A26)
- Knight Foundation: Resources and tools for journalists  
[http://knightfoundation.org/publications/browse/?q=%22%22&selected\\_facets=pubtype\\_exact:%22Resources%20and%20tools%22](http://knightfoundation.org/publications/browse/?q=%22%22&selected_facets=pubtype_exact:%22Resources%20and%20tools%22)
- Media Development and Investment Fund: Resources and sustainability case studies  
<http://www.mdif.org/about-us/resources/client/>
- Global Investigative Journalism Network: Resources and guides  
<http://gijn.org/resources/>
- International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: Tools, guides and case studies  
<http://www.icij.org/resources>
- Tow Centre for Digital Journalism: Reports and briefs  
<http://towcenter.org/#/type/research/category/reports-briefs>
- Reporters Without Borders: Practical handbooks for covering elections, conflict zones and reporting from exile  
<http://en.rsf.org/handbooks,1047.html>

- Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma: Practical guides and study modules  
<http://dartcenter.org/gateway/journalists>
- Committee to Protect Journalists: Comprehensive security guide  
<https://cpj.org/reports/2012/04/journalist-security-guide.php>
- Reuters Foundation: Publications, training and ethics guides (multiple languages)  
<http://www.trust.org/services/publication-library/>
- Institute for Non-Profit News: Practical tips and guides (US focus)  
<http://newstraining.org/guides/>
- Centre for International Media Assistance: Media development guides  
<http://www.cima.ned.org/publications/>
- Nieman Lab (Harvard): Reports and guides  
<http://niemanreports.org/>
- Columbia Journalism Review: Industry articles (US focused)  
<http://www.cjr.org/>
- News Manual: Comprehensive and practical resource for editorial training  
[http://www.thenewsmanual.net/the\\_manuals.htm](http://www.thenewsmanual.net/the_manuals.htm)
- Pew State of the Media report (2015): essential analysis of revenue, industry and audience trends (US focused)  
<http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/state-of-the-news-media-2015/>
- Internews: Publications and toolkits  
<https://internews.org/research-publications/featured>
- Institute for War and Peace Reporting: Handbook for local journalists (multi-language)  
<https://iwpr.net/printed-materials/reporting-change-handbook>
- Overseas Press Club: Training resources  
<https://www.opcofamerica.org/news/training>

## For the media development community:

### 1. Before supporting innovation, think about whether a project is replicable.

**This is not an area that lends itself to large-scale success.** The impact of the project may not be reflected in scalability, something often viewed as a critical part of classical development projects. Supporting media innovation is clearly not the same as trying to distribute ten million bed nets or vaccinate thousands of children. So while “scaling up” is not the main point of supporting media, donors should probably try to support ideas, methods and organizations that may be replicable elsewhere. Instead of scale, **focus on what can be observed, isolated and imitated. Think about how best to educate other organizations and how knowledge can be transferred.** This may mean not funding really great projects or ideas and favoring others that promise to be more useful in other places.

### 2. There should be a clear focus on the dissemination of ideas. Is this an innovation which is likely to spread? How can this project be structured in order to facilitate dissemination?

It is clear from the case studies that introducing media outlets to each other can lead to interesting results. No matter how geographically remote, different organizations do learn from other outlets around the world.

### 3. Have grantees consider the above when applying for a grant.

Until an idea has been tried, it’s hard to know if it will work. But it’s worth considering, from the start, whether and how a successful idea will disseminate. Perhaps grantees can include in their application an explanation of what they are doing that can be replicated, along with a proposal that shows that they have thought about solutions that respond to common needs and other contexts in which their innovation would make sense or be economically viable.

### 4. Consider how a project will, if successful, affect the larger media ecosystem.

The old ideas of industrial policy and Porter clusters apply here. Ideally, donor should look at innovation grants in a systemic way and plan them so that they fit together. This is an extension of the recommendation in the Knight Foundation's 2014 retrospective on their News Challenge grantees: "Measure success based on how funding improves the field, not just on the adoption or impact of individual projects."<sup>9</sup> A project that may seem like a failure may still have been worth funding if individuals involved in it use their network and resources to create something that benefits the larger media ecosystem. Ory Okollah from the Omidyar Network makes the same point.

**5. Innovation now happens faster and gets diffused quicker than in the past. Consider the implications for grant-making to support innovation.**

Consider what laws, economic changes or other innovations might make a proposed project irrelevant. Before supporting an innovation, ask whether it is robust enough to withstand later innovations. There is no need to feel bad about an innovation that is superseded by a later one as long as the grant was made on the basis of a reasonable judgment about how the larger climate would develop. Indeed, the replication of an idea could be taken as a sign of success.

**6. Consider supporting some sort of peer-to-peer knowledge-sharing network, backed with online resources and links to skilled experts or even subsidized media services (i.e. business development assistance).**

We acknowledge that aspects of our proposed network are already attempted by regional journalism organizations (peer support) and professional associations (expert guidance). Even so, media outlets often know what they need but rarely know where to look.

Some ideas that could be helpful include:

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<sup>9</sup> 'Knight News Challenge: A look at what we've learned', Knight Foundation, <http://features.knightfoundation.org/KNCsitedemo/report.html>, last accessed 8/30/2015

- **Website with a mailing list, expert help forum, library of innovations, articles and guides organized in a manner of practical use to media users.** This could perhaps take the form of an extended version of our innovation index.
- **A regular (perhaps fortnightly) online group discussion featuring a topic expert**—say, an experienced advertising executive, social media marketer, cybersecurity expert, or seasoned journalism trainer. Participants should include not just the media organizations leaders, but also staff members who directly grapple with problems, such as the reporting and advertising teams. Overhead costs after initial setup and recruitment would be minimal: some ongoing marketing and connection-building. Ideally, the network would generate its own momentum by fulfilling the needs of its members.
- **Meet the need for greater availability of non-journalism skills by providing subsidized media services**—or, at the very least, introductions to freelance contractors who have the expertise and familiarity with the needs of independent media. Many journalists running websites need training and help in a range of skills: grant applications, social media marketing, advertising and business development, and aspects of web design such as payment portals. These skills can be hard to find in many developing countries, particularly to international standard, and they are rarely needed (or affordable) on a full-time basis. Publications have expressed enthusiasm and willingness to pay for these services, and the involvement of a third-party NGO could subsidize the costs.

## **7. Possible topics for further research**

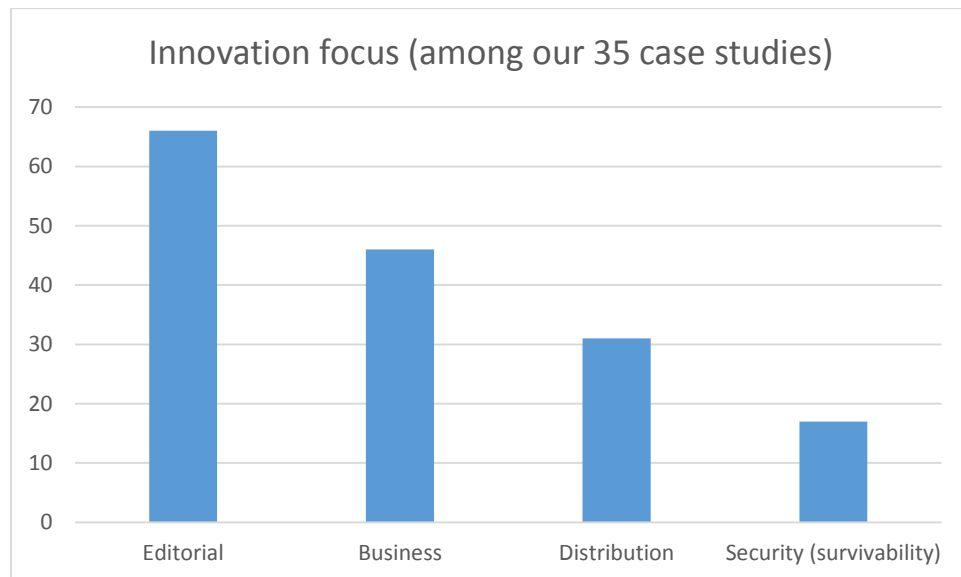
Needless to say, supporting media will be more effective if it's grounded in an understanding of the larger context. There is a dearth of information on the state of business models for journalism outlets in developing countries. Substantially advancing the media development community's knowledge in this field requires a comprehensive understanding of how independent media is supporting itself in different environments, both financially and

politically. There is no developing world version of Pew's benchmark *State of the Media* report.

We are deeply skeptical of large-scale mapping projects; they take enormous amounts of effort and resources, and by the time they are finished, they are often out-of-date. But **if PIJ were to commission new research, there are many subjects that could be of use—for instance, estimating how much money newsrooms, philanthropists and NGOs spend on investigative reporting or how much donors and NGOs spend on producing news.** As was discussed in our May 2014 board meeting, this sort of research should not be done in isolation but should instead be tied to some kind of advocacy plan, local institutions and policy goals.

## IV. INNOVATION INDEX

We found through reading and interviews that the challenges facing independent media outlets—and the innovations overcoming them—fall into four broad categories: **editorial**, **business**, **distribution** and **security**. While the outlets themselves defied easy categorization due to vast differences in size, ambition and geography, we found that our challenge-solution taxonomy could be readily applied to the problems and solutions they face.



- **Editorial**

A publication's content and production are the primary strengths of many independent outlets, particularly those founded by journalists. Common editorial challenges include difficulty in finding and retaining skilled reporters, motivating a network of voluntary contributors, grappling with advertisers who demand editorial influence, and ensuring that editorial practices enhance a publication's independence and credibility. 'Editorial solutions' to these problems could include, respectively, an internship/fellowship program to attract skilled graduate reporters hungry for experience, a membership program offering training or meet-ups to help voluntary contributors feel part of a community, a quarantined 'sponsored content' section for pushy advertisers (such as 'lifestyle' sections), and displaying an ethics code prominently on a publication's site. Strong editorial—for instance, credibly covering a niche subject—often ties



in closely with a publication's business objectives. (An example is *Jota* in Brazil, which produces in-depth coverage of the country's judicial system behind a paywall).

- **Business**

The financial and administrative model that sustains an outlet's production of content, depending on whether a publication is commercial or donor-supported. Many of the outlets surveyed in this report described themselves as not-for-profit and utilized a hybrid model generating at least some earned income. 'Not enough money' is perhaps the most fundamental business problem for independent media. The solutions are many and varied, although a general lack of expertise and poor sharing of knowledge and ideas among media outlets means that many organizations consider only a fraction of the available options. Many general business challenges—staffing, bookkeeping, customer relationship management, and others—are well understood in many fields outside journalism. Some problems specific to media include pricing a rate card correctly to lure advertisers, minimizing exposure to online bulk advertising, and working with donors unwilling to contribute funds to cover overhead. 'Business solutions' to these might include recognizing insufficient marketing skills among senior staff and budgeting help, targeting local companies for 'bespoke' advertising arrangements or forming an advertising network with other media to mitigate Google's low CPM (cost per thousand impressions), and inviting donors to take on specific reporting projects already earmarked for funding, while protecting editorial independence.

- **Distribution**

How a publication's content reaches its audience—be it print, radio, web, or even a mobile phone—can include a mix of podcasts, digital video, mobile internet. A new distribution method can reach an entirely new audience or transform an entire media landscape. (The introduction of free newspapers on the London subway forced the city's mid-tier papers to follow suit.) Distribution challenges are often greater in the developing world and options fewer, a situation which seems to breed great innovation. For example, 'poor infrastructure, no internet and low literacy' can be understood foremost as problems of distribution. Delivering content over a free mobile phone-based broadcast platform, such as that

developed by India's *Gram Vaani* or Uganda's *RootIO*, is a distribution innovation able to address these problems.

- **Security**

The security and safety of journalists is prominently advocated by groups such as the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) and Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and much training in this area has been focused on tech—particularly, the use of security tools to protect sources and safeguard communication. This category encompasses not just the physical security of an independent media outlet, but its political security and capacity to operate under a belligerent or hostile government. Security challenges range from the irritating to the existential: restrictions on company registration, censorship, harassment via kangaroo court actions, electronic surveillance by security services, gang reprisals for drug stories, religious fundamentalists objecting to coverage of certain social issues. 'Security innovations' to address these challenges are as innumerable: encryption tools for secure communication, using large overseas media as a proxy to break dangerous stories, using foreign staff less likely to be attacked, enlisting embassies to pressure a government for greater media freedoms, using a VPN correctly to mask internet traffic. 'Installing a thicker door' is a security innovation, as is running an outlet abroad and relying on a network of vetted but anonymous freelancers (like *Syria Deeply*).

This index is a resource of practical ideas, tools, innovations and models drawn from independent media outlets and our case studies around the world. The list below is merely a beginning and is by no means exhaustive. We include it for the sake of reference, interest and the prospect of further development.



## Editorial

*Journalism, content and production*

### GETTING CONTENT

- **Freelance network enables lean, flexible staffing**

A network of paid freelancers can greatly expand the work of a small number of paid staff, giving a publication flexibility while helping to ensure that an entire news agenda is properly covered. A strong freelance network can also provide a tested source of potential hires should an outlet wish to expand. In many countries, freelancers make themselves available as fixers for visiting foreign journalists; a credible independent news outlet, as a typical point of contact for these outside reporters, can find itself collecting favors through a sideline in outsourcing.

- **Voluntary contributions**

Citizen journalism can be an unreliable and inconsistent basis for an outlet hoping to sustain a stable business model. However, assembling and training a collective of voluntary contributors can be an excellent way of giving voice to otherwise neglected communities. Even a tiny stipend can change a relationship between a publication and a contributor, recognizing quality, 'professionalizing' the relationship and usually ensuring greater consistency.

- **Soliciting content from academics**

Academics employed by universities have a social obligation to share their research with the general public. Independent media can be a platform for these academics to publicize their work and gain exposure useful for their own professional aspirations. In return, a publication can gain informed opinion articles (usually for free) and ready access to subject matter experts. Editorial staff should expect to work with academic sources to ensure the content is accessible to a general audience, or even pitch articles as appropriate to the news agenda.

- **Research partnerships**

Independent media outlets can establish partnerships with international philanthropic groups on long-term research projects to help collect data, fund in-depth reporting and bring original data analysis to articles.

- **Drones**

Drones are now a cost-effective way to create unique video content for stories, as well as objectively cover events such as rallies and protests without fear of getting exposed to teargas or of having footage confiscated. Drones are especially good for determining crowd sizes. They can also be used to gain access to areas, such as disaster zones, that are otherwise off-limits to reporters or blocked by overzealous authorities. Care must be taken not to interfere with legitimate emergency workers such as firefighters, who may need free access to the airspace. Privacy must also be safeguarded.

- **Foreign internship program to temporarily import needed skills**

Journalism graduates looking for an early professional break are an abundant resource in many developed countries with long histories of journalism and high standards of education (including the US and the UK). These reporters can often be imported on a short-term basis to support the development of local journalism talent in countries without this advantage. At a minimum, the outlet is usually required to house, feed and provide a stipend for visiting reporters, but many will happily pay airfares. The outlet gains an enthusiastic staff member with up-to-date skills and a fresh perspective. Ways to take advantage of this resource are collaborating with overseas journalism universities to set up such programs, advertising on journalism jobs media for older reporters seeking a change of scenery, or making use of the Knight Fellowships.

## **BUILDING AN AUDIENCE**

- **Targeting an underserved niche**

Reporting a niche can be a publication's entire reason for existing, or it can augment broader coverage. Whatever the reason, this sort of coverage is a strong way to differentiate an independent news publication from mainstream outlets and pull in a new audience. Examples: *Jota* in Brazil successfully covers the country's judicial system (subject), and *InvestigateWEST* in the US focuses on the Pacific Northwest (region).

- **Editorial charter**

An editorial charter or a publicized code of ethics is an important first step toward asserting a publication's credibility and providing a defense should this be challenged by a subject or audience.

- **Disclosure policy**

A publicized and consistently applied disclosure policy can be an effective way to boost credibility, particularly in finance and business reporting. It is especially important for native advertising and sponsored content, and in cases where material has been provided by advertisers or article subjects (as is often the case with reviews).

- **Commercial mini-site to quarantine sponsored content**

An outlet emphasizing credibility (or covering topics, such as politics, that might discourage advertisers in certain countries) can create a separate, affiliated site around a particular commercial topic: food, entertainment, fashion and so on. The outlet can then use this site as a 'quarantine zone' for all the bad editorial practice that advertisers seem to love. Sponsored content, native advertising, listicles—anything goes here if you can generate revenue from it. Newspapers have done this very successfully with 'lifestyle' sections.

- **Separate not-for-profit arm (for investigative journalism)**

Many grant-giving organizations seem to prefer supporting specific subjects and projects to directly funding a media outlet's operating expenses. This is certainly the case with many smaller grants. A

separate not-for-profit arm of an organization can be set up to pitch for these grants, and staff can be committed to it as funding allows.

## **EDITORIAL BRANDING**

- **Professionalism and ‘ratbag’ branding**

Many independent media outlets thrive on their reputation as an alternative to the mainstream media, and perhaps being edgier and more reckless towards their content. However, many publications with a ‘ratbag’ reputation—at least those with any longevity, such as *Crikey* or *Vice*—are actually careful behind the scenes not to neglect journalism standards or a sense of professionalism.

- **Asserting credibility to stand out**

The internet has significantly lowered the barrier to entry for independent media, greatly increasing the number of voices. Credibility is one of the best ways to distinguish a publication’s voice from competition, particularly in the blogosphere and on social media.

- **Credibility can be used to attract talent**

Talented journalists often consider credible outlets highly desirable to work for. An independent publication can use this to its advantage to attract strong talent at a lower price threshold than a mainstream media outlet.



## Business

*Models, admin and ways to raise and manage revenue*

### MODELS AND SERVICES

- **‘Membership’ model**

A current trend, popularized by the notion of supporter ‘tiers’ in crowdfunding and used successfully by the not-for-profit *Texas Tribune*, is to offer subscriptions with an optional paid membership in lieu of soliciting donations. Depending on the tier, member benefits can include event invitations, special editions, behind-the-scenes newsletters, Groupon-style discounts with local advertisers, and other tokens of appreciation useful for community building and of little cost to the publication.

- **Crowdsourcing funds to sponsor a reporter’s coverage**

Outlets targeting a particular region or neglected subject have successfully crowdsourced funds to cover an issue deemed of importance to a particular community. For instance, *InvestigateWEST* raised \$35,000 from its members for a reporter to cover the Portland state legislature.

- **Tiered open/premium paywall model**

A hybrid paywall allows a publication to monetize content without losing the wide exposure and search engine accessibility that a small outlet needs to grow an audience. Publications with a substantial amount of detailed information on a niche subject of interest to a community with money (such as diplomats or foreign investors) can lock this information behind a premium paywall while publishing a free lighter version for a more general audience. Charge a premium for the minutia that a general audience would find distracting anyway.

- **Paid subscription email**

Paid email newsletters can be a method of circulating content and analysis that are deeper than what is available to a general audience on a public-facing website. *Crikey* in Australia successfully monetizes a paid daily email newsletter among an audience of 17,000 largely in the media, business and

political sectors, valued and highly relevant to those who are terrified of appearing in it.

- **Free trials for ‘squatters’**

Breaking an online audience down into subscribers, those likely to subscribe and regular visitors can allow a site to target its marketing effort. This can be an effective way to monetize a paywall, such as by giving email addresses a trial period and then seeking to convert readers to paying subscribers once their details are on file.

- **Groupon-style discount program**

Enlist new and existing advertisers to offer giveaways and high-value discounts to paid subscribers as part of a membership bonus.

- **University subscriptions**

Universities, particularly in the developed world, can be willing to support editorial effort in particular expert disciplines. Publications such as *The Conversation* have made this into a successful business model, but the concept must be balanced against the risk of being labeled a PR outfit for subscribing universities.

### **Events, conferences**

A publication can leverage its credibility in a region or subject matter and sell tables at a conference or awards ceremony. These can often attract industry sponsors as well. Priority tickets and access can be sold to members of subscribers. Organizing events is popular among trade publications, although care must be taken not to damage a publication’s credibility by over-commercializing such an event.

- **Sell your services**

Independent media outlets can attract skilled editorial staff who may be willing to conduct training workshops and other consultancies on behalf of a third party as a way to generate an income. This can be an excellent way to assemble a network of contacts in the donor community, but must be balanced against the temporary loss of a staff member from normal editorial duties. *Ziber* in Jordan claims to receive between \$4,000 and \$6,000 per a journalism training workshop run by a senior staff member



over the course of four or five days, while *News Deeply* develops websites for third-party clients.

- **Develop and license a technology or platform**

Innovative technologies or platforms developed by an independent media outlet, such as a unique content management system, can potentially be licensed and sold in other markets. *The Conversation* franchises the custom CMS it developed, which includes an integrated approval and disclosure system to make its academic writers feel comfortable about having final approval before their articles are published.

- **Sell memberships to a co-working space** A publication with a successful communal space can provide members with lockers, reserved seating or work space as in the case of Kenya's *iHub*.

- **Shared branding of a community venue**

Coffee shops are arguably more profitable than independent media. A space next door for interviews, events and cultural activities can be useful for both sides. An independent media outlet with high brand recognition in a particular market can consider renting this to a nearby local business—or opening its own.

## **Building Advertising Revenue**

- **Not just Google advertising—cut out the middleman**

The Google AdSense advertising used on most websites is usually a very poor deal for publishers, squeezed as they are at the end of the value chain. (Most revenue goes to Google.) Commission revenue, such as referrals to Amazon from a book review, can earn more depending on traffic volumes, but the best revenues usually come from directly negotiating with advertisers relevant to your audience. (Examples are a local media outlet negotiating with local businesses or a subject-matter outlet negotiating with industry businesses.)

- **Donors can advertise too; less paperwork**

Donors and international organizations can be encouraged to advertise at a premium in lieu of outright grant-giving, which avoids a substantial administrative and impact assessment overhead. This can work particularly well with job advertising, as finding skilled local staff can be difficult for donor organizations based in developing countries. Sponsored supplements should be declared as per a publication's disclosure policy.

- **In-kind service exchange with advertisers**

Potential customers wary of paying for advertising, particularly if the ad market is immature, can often be enticed with the prospect of part payment through in-kind services. This allows outlets to familiarize a potential advertiser with a publication without reducing its perceived value, while offsetting costs through obtaining needed IT, internet or office supply equipment. (Hotels can be particularly amenable if a news outlet needs to temporarily host foreign staff.) It's important to ensure that any deal is in writing and includes at least some paid component.

- **Targeted advertising effectiveness demo**

Targeted promotions with local businesses can be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of an outlet's advertising in an immature market, for instance persuading them to give a 10 percent discount on a restaurant bill if the publication's name is mentioned. This only has to work a few times for most managements to take notice and become more amenable.

- **Differentiate 'brand' advertising and 'direct' advertising with immature ad markets**

Smaller advertisers usually prefer direct advertising (“product X is X percent off”) whereas brand advertising is more generic (“product X is great”).

Consider both when compiling a rate card, keeping in mind that the response to brand advertising is very hard to measure.

- **Diversify advertising**

Having one large advertiser is not unlike having a single donor, except usually with less commitment and more of an incentive to interfere in editorial decisions. A spread of advertising clients, ideally across different industries (in case of a market slump), can greatly increase an outlet’s independence and financial resiliency.

- **Leave room to haggle**

Rate cards are routinely haggled down as far as 50 percent. Allow room to negotiate when pricing, and discount for longer commitments.

- **Outsourced advertising**

Depending on the maturity of the local advertising market, publications suitable for advertising but unwilling to deal with the hassle of sales can try outsourcing their ad inventory to a third party at a fixed rate. The ad agency usually keeps the profit beyond this fee. Alternatively, a publication can offer a high commission (50 percent or higher) as a way to lure third party advertising agents. Both arrangements can help an otherwise struggling independent media outlet remain focused on editorial.

- **City guide**

A city guide can be a cheap way for a publication focused on a city or region to produce a product attractive to local advertisers in new and established markets. Such content needs only sporadic updating (with the exception of an events calendar) and could attract advertisers who are otherwise wary of associating with an otherwise politically-charged publication.

## **ADMIN**

- **Tool: Software-as-a-service bookkeeping**

Running a publication's bookkeeping using an online platform has many advantages, chiefly security and resiliency with less information stored locally. As a secondary advantage, this information can be made available to selected third parties, such as donor organizations, increasing a grantee's transparency. It has the disadvantage of requiring internet access, and it is usually difficult to transfer to another product once you commit to one.

- **Combine office/living space for foreign staff**

Supporting the rent of an imported worker—an obligation in many developing countries—can be extremely expensive for a small media outlet trying to address a local skill shortage. Consolidating the office and living space, ideally in a larger premises, is something many expats will accept, but can add managing cabin fever to the list of management challenges.

- **Emergency office internet using smartphone tethering**

Online news sites in countries with poor infrastructure can be at the mercy of internet outages—or having the plug pulled. In an emergency, most smartphones can be set to create a small Wi-Fi hotspot and allow a small number of users to continue working online over the phone's 3G connection.



## Distribution

*Circulation, dissemination and anything related to medium*

- **Paid Facebook promotion for every story**

A small marketing budget for a story on social media can greatly increase its reach among a target audience, attract ‘likes’ and boost the article’s circulation on members’ newsfeeds. This is perhaps one of the most cost-effective ways for a small independent news publication to reach a wide audience quickly and is especially powerful for those focusing on niche subjects or particular geographic areas. Costs vary depending on country; *InvestigateWEST* in the US had good results investing \$12-18 per story to reach an additional 6,000-8,000 people. Paid promotion can be an extremely cost-effective distribution tactic in developing countries with large populations on social media.

- **Syndication agreements with regional, international media**

Local independent media outlets or those with a specific subject focus can smooth the syndication process by signing up regional and international media outlets before major news breaks in their beat. Retainer fees (i.e. income paid regularly) are increasingly rare vis-à-vis per-story payments, but they can still be negotiated if exclusivity is on the table. It can be helpful to think of every independent media outlet as potentially its own news agency.

- **Quick community broadcasting via WhatsApp**

Use the mobile application WhatsApp to create a community, publish or report stories relevant to a local audience (such as a network of vetted citizen journalists). Messages can be broadcast to a maximum of 250 recipients as a blind carbon copy (BCC), allowing each recipient to respond directly without seeing who the other recipients are. This model has been used successfully by *EyeWitness News* in South Africa. As Deputy News Editor Camilla Bath explained: “People are very chatty. They respond to us and tell us what they think about stories or the selections. It’s a powerful tool for news tipoffs as well. You create a community. People see you as a person or entity rather than a service.”

- **Hosting by a larger news outlet**

Independent media operating in exile, if it has high credibility, can consider being hosted under a large foreign media outlet as a way to avoid being blocked by the authorities in the country it is covering. This strategy naturally imposes limitations for a site's business model, but it can greatly increase a publication's security and bolster its credibility with a local audience. Example: *Tehran Bureau's* hosting by *The Guardian*.

- **Mobile phone-based content distribution**

Distribution can be a challenge in places with limited infrastructure. Bad roads inhibit print circulation, long-range radio broadcasts require power and expense, and lack of internet makes the benefits of the web moot. On the other hand, mobile networks tend to be accessible in many of these same areas. Companies like Gram Vaani have successfully created mobile phone-based distribution networks to bridge this gap, effectively turning mobile phones into radios. Callers dial a number which hangs up and calls them back playing their chosen broadcast, saving them the cost of the call. Such a system could be used to reach the internet's 'dark' regions in largely untapped markets. It is also cheaper than community radio and has the benefit of accessibility in areas with low literacy.

- **Shared subscription deals**

Packaging a subscription deal to include complementary publications can be a way for multiple independent media outlets to expand their reach among similar audiences. Example: *Himal Southasian* (Nepal) and *The Caravan* magazine (India).

- **Free access in low-income areas**

Independent media sites operating paywalls can consider lifting them depending on a reader's location. For instance, local audiences might be able to access the site's content for free, while the diaspora abroad would be charged a subscription fee. *Malaysiakini's* model differentiates readers on the basis of language. Its Tamil and Malay editions are free to access, while the English and Chinese editions are paywalled.

- Syndication packages for foreign-language media in other markets**  
 A local independent media outlet in a particular country may have an abundance of content that is relevant and of value to expatriate media published in other countries. This is particularly the case in countries with large populations of migrant workers. Local publications can consider a 'news from home' syndication package to fill foreign-language pages in these markets and expand their reach.
- Emphasize sharable content: video, infographics, multimedia**  
 Multimedia such as data visualizations, video and infographics are readily and easily shared on social media networks. These elements not only pull an audience and boost brand recognition, but also—in the case of video—can greatly increase the circulation of any pre-roll advertising.
- Free syndication under creative commons**  
 Content can be stamped with the creative commons license, which can encourage wider syndication of important stories (as long as the content producer has an alternative income, such as grants). Paid syndication generally attracts greater assumptions of credibility.
- Covert blogging**  
 An hostile political environment can limit an outlet's ability to publish stories on contentious, dangerous or socially taboo topics. An alternative is to allow a trusted reporter to report such stories through an anonymous blog. Under optimal circumstances, the outlet can 'follow the lead' of other local media and report on the contents of the 'mystery' blog, with an appropriate tone of disapproval. This can be very effective within state-controlled media outlets, allowing insider knowledge to be reported to an outside audience.
- Reporting dangerous scoops through foreign media**  
 Scoops and leaks that may be too dangerous to break locally in a climate of poor press freedom can instead be leaked to trusted foreign media. The local publication can then report second-hand from the foreign story the moment it is published, thereby maintaining plausible deniability.



## Security

*Physical, cybersecurity, and anything related to political survival*

### **NEWSROOM PRACTICES**

- **Business reporting in hostile/belligerent political climates**

Dictatorships and other regimes belligerent toward independent media are remarkably tolerant of business reporting, perhaps out of a desire to encourage private investment. Foreign investors require accurate and credible information, and most countries are keen to attract them. A glossy publication nominally focused on business can meet this need, publishing in plain sight while training young reporters to be effective journalists and setting a local standard for journalism. And because business, politics and corruption often intersect in such countries, established business publications can get away with reporting a great deal—between the lines, if necessary. Examples: *Myanmar Times* (Burma), *The Source* (Zimbabwe).

- **Leak documents to yourself to maintain plausible deniability**

While the phrase “exclusively obtained” may be high in a journalist’s vernacular, in certain cases—such as when covering particularly violent gangs, or a rogue authority in a country with little judicial recourse—it can be safer to maintain plausible deniability when using controversial leaks. Leaking such information anonymously on social media and reporting from this source can be a method to accomplish that while also encouraging mainstream media to also pursue the material.

- **Presence of foreign staff can discourage crackdowns**

Employing several foreign staff members in countries with unstable politics or a history of government belligerence towards the media can be a form of protection. Foreign staff represent the potential involvement and chastisement of a foreign embassy, which can greatly increase the political cost of a government or police force taking direct action against a publication. The worst excesses of security forces tend to be directed at local people; the risk of a foreign witness can discourage this behavior.

- **Local threat training for reporters**

Local staff are often the most aware of potential threats to their safety—as



well as the most vulnerable. Holding a group discussion about the dangers, emphasizing awareness and identifying moments of greatest risk—such as commuting to and from the office, or fumbling for the keys outside the front door of one’s home—can help encourage risk mitigation. (Risk mitigation strategies may include varying the commuting route or calling home ahead of time to ensure that someone meets the person at the door).

- **Establish relationships with regional and international media bodies**  
Groups like Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) can provide preventative training and, occasionally, resources in emergencies as well as press releases and general advocacy. The process is much accelerated by making sure they are aware of an outlet’s situation, history and risk profile. Invoking affiliation with these groups can increase the political cost of a crackdown on your media outlet.

## **CYBERSECURITY**

- **Tool: Virtual Private Network (VPN)**  
A VPN is a cheap and effective way to mask internet traffic, hiding your location, and useful for accessing sites otherwise blocked by a government and evading surveillance and censorship. Use of the VPN itself is usually not masked, so a good excuse for using one may be needed if dealing with a technologically sophisticated eavesdropper. Payment for a VPN service can also be masked by using a ‘gift card’ payment service, such as PayGarden.
- **Tool: TOR Onion Routing**  
TOR (short for The Onion Router) can allow online communication to remain anonymous with near certainty, preventing even technologically sophisticated authorities from monitoring traffic. The easiest way to use TOR is with a TOR browser. Downsides include its usually slow speed, and the fact that TOR usage itself is identifiable which can itself be a red flag for anyone monitoring.
- **Tool: Hackchat**  
Encrypted email can be a hassle to set up and requires both communicating

parties to have some technological ability. Hackchat is a simple, disposable, self-destructing anonymous chatroom allowing two people to easily have a text conversation online. Users agree on a codeword and a time, and then access a chatroom by visiting the address [https://hack.chat/?\[password\]](https://hack.chat/?[password]). The conversation is erased when the browser is closed. For best results, use with a TOR browser.

- **PO box to mask location**

Business registration processes in most countries require an address. In countries with media-belligerent governments, using a PO box won't fool a determined authority, but it can reduce the risk of a disgruntled (or hired) mob spontaneously forming outside the office in reaction to politically or religiously contentious reporting.

- **Remote operation**

In cases where it is not feasible to operate independent media outlets openly (such as Iran and North Korea), publications have been successfully set up remotely, using an office abroad and a network of local, vetted (and anonymized) freelancers. Examples: *Tehran Bureau*, *Syria Deeply*, *North Korea News*.

## V. METHODOLOGY

Our team of researchers and authors meld practical backgrounds in journalism in both the developed and the developing worlds with extensive experience in media development and public policy.<sup>10</sup> Our process was two-pronged. First, we conducted interviews with independent media outlets around the world, learning how they innovate to sustain themselves and survive in often challenging reporting environments. We present these case studies as a library of practical knowledge from the field. Secondly, we conducted an extensive review of practitioner literature across the media development community, seeking to identify trends in journalism development and media sustainability around the world. We consolidate our findings into the points below and make recommendations based on the practical needs of the outlets we studied as well as our broad perspective on the challenges they face.

### How we chose

We assembled a list of potential case studies based on the recommendations of past and present SIPA students working around the world as well as our own network in the media development and wider journalism community. We peer-reviewed our lists, discussing them with experts in different parts of the world so as to get confirmation of who to include or who to cut from our initial list.

We reinforced our list by noting mentions of particular outlets during our literature review, and also drew on personal connections – for instance, study author JJ Robinson was a former editor at *Minivan News* and still had contacts at the publication, and had also previously written for *Himal Southasian*. We contacted all the outlets on our list, requesting to interview a senior figure for 30-60 minutes. Our requests and interviews took place over a three month period in the summer of 2015.

Our selection emphasized media startups showing both innovation and a track record of consistent and high quality content of social merit, produced independently of the mainstream media in the countries in which they operated. Some, such as *Malaysiakini*, were chosen to benchmark a successful and

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<sup>10</sup>Some of the alumni and current students from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs helped with interviews after suggesting outlets they came across in their travels.

sustainable independent media outlet. The majority were digital, and we included the odd concept we felt was particularly innovative and with wider applicability (for instance, *Gram Vaani* and its mobile broadcasting platform). Observing that our connections in Latin America were particularly strong, we decided to prominently feature the vibrant independent media scene in Mexico as a microcosm of the security and business challenges facing outlets worldwide.

### **Limitations of our study**

Our response rate was about 35% which is quite high for a study of this kind. Journalists are overworked, under pressured and extremely busy, and we are grateful to those who generously gave us their time.

- Our selection of case studies was influenced by the suggestions and peer review of our own network of contacts as well as the literature, both of which are anchored in the donor community. This naturally skewed our selection toward news outlets that rely on grant funding, rather than on earned revenue although we tried to include outlets with at least some earned income.
- We focused on outlets publishing in Spanish and English. Successful independent media outlets with a presence in English tend to already attract a lot of attention, so we tried to look beyond the usual but we note the lack here of local language publications that often escape wider notice.
- Some organizations were reluctant to share financial information, particularly where this was commercial. Such information is extremely useful and we are grateful to those publications that were candid. Where we could not obtain specific figures, we sought to instead obtain percentages, to get an indication of how reliant a publication was on donor funding.

It was hard to generalize about factors such as a publication's reach, traffic or the number of followers on social media, since these parameters vary across countries and media outlets. Instead, we erred toward the qualitative, interviewing our subjects in depth to understand the difficulties their organizations face and catalog the ways in which they overcome them. We can

make general, anecdotal observations on trends we discovered. For instance, an online-only independent media outlet staffed by paid journalists and producing regular editorial coverage at a national level seems to have a minimum budget starting at around \$70,000 to \$100,000 a year—“peanuts,” in the words of one editor.

**DISCLOSURE: Please note that a number of the outlets profiled are funded by PIJ or some other part of the Open Society Foundation.**

## VI. LITERATURE REVIEW

We reviewed reports on journalism, financial sustainability, and innovation that were published by universities, media development organizations and journalism organizations since 2011. We looked for reports that included case studies and practical examples of innovation. Most of this literature tended to focus on the US and Europe and on financial sustainability. However we summarize the key points below and include a précis of the top ten reports we read.

### Summary of lit review

- 1) Most reports looked at the US and Europe and some discussed Africa.
- 2) Most divided the world of media into for-profit and not-for-profit publications and discussed what kinds of business models could make media houses profitable. As is well known, **advertising rates, at least in developed markets, are expected to continue to fall, so media outlets will continue to try making money in a range of ways**—including hosting events, applying for donor funding, selling subscriptions and developing groups of loyal supporters who pay for specialized information.
- 3) Perhaps because of the success of the Philippines Center for Investigative Journalism and *ProPublica*, **there is currently a great deal of interest in funding investigative reporting in developing countries**. Donors emphasize funding and developing content, rather than on helping independent media outlets achieve long-term sustainability through business development assistance. MDIF has demonstrated rare success in this area (i.e. *Malaysiakini*), but the scale is still small and targeted at its clients.
- 4) We found comparatively little literature discussing the sustainability of independent media in developing countries, even though many donors emphasize this priority to their grantees. Instead, **literature on media in the developing world seems to broadly focus on improving content**, particularly investigative journalism. (A substantial subset, however, looks at journalist safety and security, beyond the scope of this report. Both trends are likely driven by the number of media NGOs focused on these

topics.) Conversely, **literature on independent media sustainability overwhelmingly focuses on the developed world**, and the US market in particular, perhaps due to the availability of comparative data and activity of many foundations and philanthropic organizations based there.

- 5) Many of the sustainability lessons and innovations described in the US and European reports are being applied by independent media in the developing world. *Ziber* (Jordan) and *iHub* (Kenya) have experimented with community spaces, *Himal* (Nepal) has introduced a membership model based on the *Texas Tribune*, and the legal publication *Jota* (Brazil) held a successful event on judicial infrastructure. Yet literature on outlets in non-Western markets nonetheless tends to focus exclusively on content and journalism output.
- 6) Donors' frank reviews of the grants they have awarded to support the development of tools and technologies suggest that the vast majority of these tools fail to achieve any kind of sustained adoption, regardless of the market. The tools that do succeed seem to be on the business side, such as one adopted by a 2010 Knight Foundation grantee: open-source real-time advertising software NowSpots, funded by a grant of \$257,000 in 2010 and sold for \$25 million in 2014. More often, an otherwise self-congratulatory case study will typically contain the phrase "struggled to gain adoption."
- 7) The literature identifies the desirability of media in the global south developing along Western ideals—that is, with a view of journalism as the fourth pillar of democracy that informs the public and holds authorities to account. However in its near-exclusive focus on content production in these markets, the literature almost entirely neglects the business side that allows media to flourish in the developing world.
- 8) Measuring an outlet's impact or relative success remains challenging. Donors often defer to site views, Twitter follows and facebook likes, but these may not adequately capture audience engagement.

# **‘Gaining Ground: How Non-Profit News Ventures Seek Sustainability’**

**Knight Foundation, April 2015**

Kate Marshall, Community Wealth Partners

[http://features.knightfoundation.org/nonprofitnews-2015/pdfs/KF\\_NonprofitNews2015.pdf](http://features.knightfoundation.org/nonprofitnews-2015/pdfs/KF_NonprofitNews2015.pdf)

The Knight Foundation has produced three major studies of non-profit news outlet sustainability since 2011. The most recent, *‘Gaining Ground: How Non-Profit News Ventures Seek Sustainability,’*<sup>6</sup> was published in April 2015 and analyzes 18 US organizations in detail—most of them recipients of Knight funding—in a bid to identify “emerging best practice.” The foundation’s affiliation with the report’s case studies allow for greater-than-usual insight, particularly with regard to finances and traffic, but it focuses exclusively on US examples. The conclusions therefore need to be considered in the context of a developed and saturated media market with ubiquitous net penetration. Still, the report pinpoints trends that could be applied in less developed markets. For instance, the percentage of traffic to all case studies from mobile devices doubled to 22 percent in 2013, a trend that would be perilous for any news website to ignore.

One innovation identified here was the shift from a “donor” to a “membership” model mentality. There is evidence that this shift is already underway: in Malaysia, the independent political news website *Malaysiakini* successfully monetized a membership paywall format in two of its four languages. The report’s examples suggest that this model shows greater success once a publication has matured and proven its ability to consistently put out high-quality content relevant to its audience.

The report recommends diversifying income from donor funding, noting the success of native advertising, sponsorships and events among its sample. It urges the setting of business goals and investment “in capacity, not just content”—a finding that would seem to endorse the theory that many independent media outlets need help as much with business and distribution as they do with content production.

The news outlets in Knight’s sample collectively grew their web traffic by 75 percent in 2011-2013, yet advertising revenues remained flat during the same



period. Earned income accounted for a meager 23 percent of revenue of these outlets in 2012, implying a substantial and continued dependency on donor funding—58 percent of total revenue in 2013.

The majority of earned income was derived from sponsorship rather than advertising (other successful lines included events, training and subscriptions). Knight observed a moderate increase of five percent in overall earned revenue and “a trend towards greater sustainability.” However, it should be noted that Knight’s results are skewed somewhat by its inclusion of current not-for-profit news poster child, *The Texas Tribune*, by far the largest organization considered in the study (42 employees, compared to the second largest, *MinnPost*, with 17).

# ‘The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism’

**Tow Digital Center for Digital Journalism, March 2011**

Bill Grueskin, Ava Seave, Lucas Graves

[http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The\\_Story\\_So\\_Far.pdf](http://cjrarchive.org/img/posts/report/The_Story_So_Far.pdf)

A 2011 report by the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, ‘*The Story So Far: What We Know About the Business of Digital Journalism*’<sup>7</sup>, considers the economic challenges facing news organizations following the decline of their legacy business models. The book-length report is authored by the *Wall Street Journal* veteran Bill Grueskin and media business consultant Ava Seave, adjunct professors at Columbia University’s journalism and business schools respectively. The report is written from a business perspective, with the understanding that while philanthropic and government support can help, “it is ultimately up to the commercial market to provide the economic basis” for sustainable journalism.

The report is US-focused—though by no means irrelevant to other markets—and, at four years old, is perhaps a little dated. Yet it has a decidedly business-focused approach to journalism, and identifies many of the opportunities inherent in digital: capacity for rapid innovation, greater understanding and tracking of audience behavior, short time to market, increased lifespan of content, audience engagement, lower cost of production and lower capital investment. These characteristics are as relevant to developing online media in new markets as they are in the US.

Seave and Grueskin address a number of misconceptions about online media, useful to anyone engaged in assessing the impact and reach of news sites. Size of audience is an unreliable indication of a site’s performance, reach, influence or profitability. Instead, breaking the audience down into “fans” (two visits a week), “regulars” (one or two), and “fly-bys” (once a month or less) can offer greater insight into a readership and how one might plan a subscription/membership model or market an audience to advertisers. The report argues that engagement, not circulation, is the new unit of monetization.

One might divide an online audience into subscribers, potential subscribers, and free-riders, focusing on winning over the second as a revenue source. Like

advertisers, media development agencies might reconsider the use of site hits or Facebook 'likes' as a sign of user engagement, and instead help their clients by demanding deeper user analytics.

Even in 2011, the report warned of the commodification of online advertising, with online juggernauts such as Facebook and Google squeezing the margins for publishers and emphasizing volume (CPM, or cost per thousand impressions) rather than quality. The report notes that a quarter of all digital advertising views belonged to Facebook, while Google received half the total spent globally on online advertising. Advertisers will pay for an engaged audience—and so the authors predict the rise of native advertising—but still value volume. Small sites stand to gain by joining forces and creating their own ad networks, thereby pushing out the middlemen currently absorbing much of the ad revenues and reducing the value to the publisher. This innovation might be readily transported to a developing market; larger advertisers keen to reach an informed audience while supporting the social agenda of independent media may be open to working with a network of such sites rather than one site with low volume.

The report is valuable to this study because it calls for publishers to innovate their approach to advertising. Diversification of revenue with events and sponsorships is all very well, but advertising remains powerful when it comes to sustainability and should not be neglected. The authors warn that attracting large numbers of lightly engaged readers—a tactic encouraged by media impact assessments—may be something of a trap. 'Volume advertising' is commoditized, and small publishers will never compete credibly with giant global ad networks; moreover, any revenue share received by small publishers will be a tiny percentage. Publications should therefore rethink the relationship between audience and advertising—not a strength of an average reporter—and seek to create a deeply engaged audience that can be monetized through alternatives to the CPM (cost per thousand) impression-based pricing system. "Small publishers have been successful selling ads by the week or month rather than by volume," the authors note.

A general weakness of the report for the purposes of this study is its focus on the viability of large legacy media outlets in the US. Realistically, many of the innovative outlets considered later in the study are small online endeavors lacking century-old brands and operating in new and challenging markets.

# ‘Seeking the Single Subject News Model’

**Tow Center for Digital Journalism**, December 2014

Kristin Nolan, Lara Setrakian

<http://towcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Seeking-The-Single-Subject-News-Model.pdf>

Hyperlocal sites share many characteristics with single-subject news outlets. A second report written by journalists Kristin Nolan and Lara Setrakian and jointly produced by the Tow Center and Knight Foundation, *‘Seeking the Single Subject News Model’*<sup>8</sup>, suggests that the narrow targeting of a subject can “dramatically raise the supply of high-quality journalism, covering complex and chronic issues that are widely neglected in mainstream media.”

The model described in this report is particularly relevant to countries where the mainstream media is state-controlled, dominated by business oligarchies, or otherwise suffering from a legacy of propaganda and poor journalism. Indeed, many independent media outlets in such countries may default to single-subject news in their focus on corruption, crooked politics or human rights abuses.

The authors note the impact of technology in eliminating the barriers to entry, lowering cost of production while opening access to new audiences and allowing niche sites to challenge large, heavily invested legacy media groups. This fact alone is not enough, however. The real “agent of change” in such endeavors is the entrepreneurial journalist, who becomes “de facto founder of a small media enterprise.”

The authors consider an eclectic assortment of US and international single-subject sites, from *Tehran Bureau* and *North Korea News* to *HealthMap* and the *Gotham Gazette*. The entrepreneurial nature of these start-up news outlets prompts a trove of innovation, particularly around revenue and distribution. The New York-based *Tehran Bureau*, for instance, reported on Iran with sufficient consistency and credibility as to become affiliated first with PBS Frontline and then *The Guardian*, receiving fundraising support, goods in kind, and the protective umbrella of association with major international news outlets. This kind of innovative affiliation could be worth exploring in countries where external media interest is high, but where access limited, difficult, and restricted by language.

The report identifies funding as the biggest problem facing single-subject outlets but notes that this holds true for any news start-up. Even self-funded sites relying on volunteer labor required “a mix of technology, digital marketing and business strategy, all within the context of lean operations.” Journalists, even those of the entrepreneurial variety, may have a tendency to overlook such matters or consider them mundane administrative issues, given their focus on reporting. Many founders reported having difficulty with technology providers and had to learn how to handle much of the technology themselves. This suggests that some kind of model or standardized and updated resource targeting news start-ups, clearly outlining the latest available technology options, could be of use.

Few sites were found to be aggressively marketing themselves but some approaches showed innovation. *HealthMap* ran a campaign alongside the release of the film *Contagion*. *FactCheck.org* sent launch postcards to DC journalists, and *OpenCanada* marketed at academic and industry events. *Deep-Sea News* used its social media presence to aggregate stories in its ocean news niche, attracting subscribers without diluting the content on its own site. The stated long-term business goals tended to simply be “survive tomorrow.” One site, covering football doping, had a “planned obsolescence,” intending to fold after breaking a major story and sufficiently highlighting the subject in the mainstream media.

The news outlets showed a preference for earned advertising revenue but worried about seeking direct sponsorship due to perceived conflicts of interest. Many preferred events that linked sponsors with the target audience to ongoing relationships. Ethical concerns at some outlets precluded all earned income other than direct revenue (content, merchandise). *North Korea News* successfully monetized a tiered paywall, including a ‘professional-grade’ package that provided detailed reporting on state media and military officials—no doubt required reading for a particular niche market. ‘Leveraging local’ and providing greater depth to ‘super-users’ at a premium cost is an innovative option for smaller independent publishers, particularly those covering a market of interest to business and industry. Details that would usually be disregarded as extraneous for a general audience can be monetized on a subscription basis, while broader focus makes it difficult for more mainstream media to compete.

The report draws few conclusions from its data (other than citing the average cost of a single-subject site: \$358,917 for one year of operation).

# ‘Global Investigative Journalism: Strategies for Support’

Center for International Media Assistance, January 2013

David Kaplan

<http://www.cima.ned.org/resource/global-investigative-journalism-strategies-for-support/>

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) has produced a series of reports focusing on different aspects of media development. Here, we will consider several relevant to this study. ‘*Global Investigative Journalism: Strategies for Support*’<sup>9</sup>, written by David Kaplan, the executive director of the Global Investigative Journalism Network, examines ways to “support and professionalize” investigative journalism in countries transitioning to democracy.

Kaplan claims that only two percent of global media development funding—\$12 million of an estimated \$487 million per year—goes to investigative journalism, despite its impact. (For instance, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism’s eight-month corruption investigation in 2000 led to the downfall of President Joseph Estrada, and Chinese magazine *Caixin* exposed the kidnapping and black-market sale of babies in 2011.) Yet most media development funding targets citizen reporting, open government initiatives and security.

The Open Society Foundation, Kaplan notes, plays “the largest and most critical role,” primarily through its support of non-profit investigative journalism outlets. He focuses on developing the investigative skills of individual reporters rather than sustainable outlets, but his understanding of media in transitional democracies is particularly relevant. Even small-scale independent outlets can provide a much-demanded alternative to existing local media, which may be tied to politicians, government and organized crime.

Risks to investigative journalism—and, by extension, independent media—include: the legal environment, the vibrancy and competitiveness of the mainstream media, public support for quality journalism, capacity to reach high standards (journalism schools, associations, etc.), availability of strong leadership, and funding. Kaplan warns against developing models inappropriate for individual countries; running an investigative journalism non-profit in a place with criminal libel statutes is impossible, he notes. But being based overseas can help protect journalists from prosecution and reprisals.

# ‘Business Journalism Thrives - Even Under Repressive Regimes’

Center for International Media Assistance, August 2014

Don Podesta

<http://www.cima.ned.org/resource/business-journalism-thrives-even-under-repressive-regimes/>

Business journalism can thrive even under repressive environments—at least those where there is some kind of government. A second CIMA report, *‘Business Journalism Thrives - Even Under Repressive Regimes’*<sup>10</sup>, describes business publications thriving under regimes as authoritarian as China and Zimbabwe. They are hardly underground; publications like Zimbabwe’s *The Source* (the country’s first business news service) are registered, have offices and operate openly with little of the harassment targeting more politically-orientated media. “Our strength is that economic news is kind of viewed as less threatening,” notes the founder, explaining how his publication serves the need of big players for accurate and credible information—big players that even repressive regimes are keen to attract. The report cites similar examples in Russia, Malaysia and Cambodia.

Follow the money, and suddenly every corruption story is a business story. Corruption naturally merges politics and business; the trick, it seems, is to cover it under a ‘businessy’ masthead, preferably with high production values to match. The report’s author, Dan Podesta, identifies away for media development groups to develop journalism in difficult environments under the guise of business coverage. Zimbabwe’s *The Source* offers an example of the kind of thinking required: unable to recruit from devastated journalism schools churning out government presspeople, the publication instead recruits business school graduates and trains them to write. Funded by the Thomson Reuters Foundation and Dutch Foreign Ministry via the European Journalism Center (EJC), *The Source* maintains an army of stringers across the country generating stories that are picked up by the local press, and intends to eventually transition to a for-profit model.

# **‘Investigative Journalism in Emerging Democracies: Models, Challenges and Lessons Learned’**

**Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), January 2013.**

Drew Sullivan

<http://issuu.com/cima-publications/docs/investigative-reporting-emerging-democracies>

A third CIMA report, *‘Investigative Journalism in Emerging Democracies: Models, Challenges and Lessons Learned’*<sup>11</sup>, written by the founder of the Center for Investigative Reporting in Bosnia Drew Sullivan, retreads much of the ground in the Kaplan report but introduces criteria for assessing media environments.

Sullivan urges engagement and questioning of local journalists in an effort to define local standards of fairness, accuracy, clarity and ethical behavior, asking them to define investigative reporting to try and develop grassroots buy-in rather than imposing a top-down model (the kind of practice that leads to sporadic funding of individual stories deemed of import by donors, rather than developing a local and sustainable culture of journalism). The report soundly assesses the merits and shortfalls of media development approaches—training, funding of individual stories and mentoring of teams and editors—highlighting where money is likely to be wasted. For instance, training reporters in countries with poor standards of journalism, particularly one-off trainings, may be ineffective if the reporters are simply unable to put their new skills into practice. Funding of individual stories may benefit countries with higher standards of reporting but limited resources, but in countries with poor standards it is unlikely to improve the journalism climate beyond providing a little experience. The table on pages 32 and 33 is an excellent summary of the pitfalls and opportunities of the various approaches.

Sullivan highlights mentoring programs—pairing experienced journalists and editors with those in countries with low standards of journalism—as one of the most helpful forms of media development.



# ‘Chasing Sustainability on the Net’

University of Tampere, USC Annenberg, Waseda University, October 2012.

Esa Sirkkunen, Clare Cook and Pekka Pekkala

<http://www.submojour.net/archives/989/table-of-contents/>

A joint project with Finland’s University of Tampere, *Chasing Sustainability on the Net*<sup>12</sup> analyzes the business models and sustainability of 69 news media start-ups across nine countries (including Italy, US, Slovakia and Japan). Although the case studies are largely confined to developed media markets, their relatively large number and emphasis on data collection allow for a broad comparison of approaches to sustainability.

The study identifies five primary mechanisms of generating revenue: advertising, paying for content (i.e. subscription), selling data or technology, events, and freelance and consulting services. Advertising is the most common revenue stream (cost per click/action/view, fixed term and ad networks), particularly for start-ups with larger turnovers, but the majority of outlets analyzed had diversified to include others. The better performing sites were able to match advertising against their content, opening possibilities for direct sponsorship but also ethical quandaries.

Crowdfunding and bottom-up financing was used rarely and only by sites with especially unique content, while the revenue potential for affiliate marketing (such as a percentage of referred sales) was “insignificant.” Merchandising was occasionally used as a small complementary revenue stream. The subscription model, the authors noted, had “gained the most traction in countries where leverage can be wagered on the price of good journalism,” with readers willing to pay for unique content that “challenges the status quo.” This would seem to support the assumption of previous studies considered here—namely, that independent, high-quality journalism is valued in countries where it is limited or does not exist.

Sustainability metrics varied by country but were insightful and could be used for setting business goals. For instance, a news start-up in the US with 1-3 people could be expected to reach financial sustainability with annual revenues of \$100,000 to \$200,000. National characteristics present different opportunities -

the UK, for instance, has few niche news sites relative to the US, but many hyperlocal sites covering towns and even individual streets. Italy has small, specialized press agencies covering subjects such as science, ecology and books.

As with the Grueskin and Seave study of the business of digital journalism, this report identifies the figure of the “journalist entrepreneur,” usually working alone or in a team of no more than three, and suggests that those in this field need to broaden their business acumen and “think about money from the start.”

# ‘Survival is Success: Journalistic Online Start-ups in Western Europe’

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, April 2012

Nicola Bruno and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

[http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Survival%20is%20Success%20Journalistic%20Online%20Start-ups%20in%20Western%20Europe\\_0.pdf](http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Survival%20is%20Success%20Journalistic%20Online%20Start-ups%20in%20Western%20Europe_0.pdf)

This 2012 report<sup>13</sup> reviews the sustainability of online news start-ups in Germany, France and Italy. Besides the US, these countries are three of the largest and most saturated media markets dominated by incumbent legacy outlets—and unlike the US, they have a decidedly national focus. None of the start-ups examined were breaking even solely on advertising, and most were found to be making an operating loss, dependent on continued investment or outside support. The two key challenges start-ups face, argue authors Bruno and Nielsen, are the capacity of legacy media outlets to leverage their existing resources and brands to pull larger audiences (even in the absence of profit) and the glut of very low margin online display advertising. The report examines nine outlets in depth, two of which are profitable: France’s *Mediapart* produces investigative journalism behind a successfully-monetized paywall, and German cultural aggregation website *Perlentaucher* (or “pearl diver”) fills a niche left by larger media outlets, while claiming to be the most read online cultural magazine in Germany.

*Perlentaucher* was able to stay lean, employing 3-4 people, and tailored advertising relative to its content and audience, thereby avoiding the middlemen of low value volume display advertising. Tailored advertising generated 35% of the site’s income and revenue sharing with an online bookstore another 15-20%, with the remainder made up of reader donations, bulk advertising, a newsletter and some content syndication. *Mediapart* launched behind a paywall in 2008 after a six-month campaign to obtain 10,000 subscribers, and successfully occupied an anti-establishment niche in the French journalism arena along similar lines as liberal US media. By 2012 its aggressive investigative reporting style had broken several major scandals and attracted 58,000 paying subscribers as well as a series of high-profile court cases ensuring further publicity. Since October 2010, the site has broken even, almost solely on the basis of its subscribers, although this approach has compromised its reach.

Bruno and Nielsen warn about drawing comparisons between countries, and in particular identify a dearth of research on journalism start-ups outside developed media market. They note that the outlets usually studied tend to operate in countries with ubiquitous internet access and data collection (Pew's State of the US Media reports, for instance). Less developed markets with poorer potential audiences and lower rates of internet access are unlikely to support a paywall, for example. Nonetheless, the authors do identify factors that contribute to the success of journalism start-ups, regardless of geography.

"The journalistic start-ups most likely to thrive are those that deliver a distinct, quality product, operate with lean organizations, have diverse revenue streams, and are oriented towards niche audiences poorly served by existing legacy media," the authors argue. "Beyond quality content, a lean cost structure, diversified revenue streams, and careful positioning within a given media market seem to be the necessary preconditions for success for journalistic online start-ups at this stage."

# **‘Africa’s Media Boom: The Role of International Aid’**

**Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), National Endowment for Democracy, October 2014**

Mary Myers

<http://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Africas-Media-Boom.pdf>

This report, produced by CIMA and the National Endowment for Democracy, reviews the impact of donor media assistance on the liberalization of media in sub-Saharan Africa, a process which started in the early 1990s. Mary Myers, the report’s author and African media expert, argues that this investment was driven by a desire to develop the continent’s media along “Western lines” following the end of the Cold War. The growth of African media has been extraordinary: from just 10 commercial broadcasters in 1985 to more than 2,000 private and community radio stations and 300 independent TV stations by 2014. This came with, and perhaps contributed to, a wave of democratization forcing concessions from many African autocrats. Myers notes that where the government could once control private media by threatening to withdraw state advertising, media now profited from the political pluralism of many new candidates. Technology has lowered the cost of producing media, while greatly increasing access, reach and audience size. In the African context of tyrannical distances, poor transportation, and low incomes and literacy rates, radio was the ideal medium. It was up to the audience to ‘vote’ for it by obtaining receivers—which they did, in vast numbers.

“Considering the poverty of the majority of Africa’s population, household media equipment ownership was relatively high,” observes Myers. This is consistent with our hypothesis that independent media is most in demand in markets where it is has historically been absent or repressed.

Donor strategy generally revolved around creating the environment for independent media to flourish: pushing for peace, unionization, public service broadcasting, minority coverage, liberal media legislation, and protection of journalists. Direct support tended to target community radio; with a few exceptions, private radio did not receive donor funding. Some stations were fully funded by foreign donors to fulfill specific political purposes, such as countering hate speech or providing access to information for neglected rural minorities.

Sustainability for donor-supported outlets tends to revolve around obtaining the next grant (although in some cases, donors may restrict support to start-up expenses, or sponsor public service announcements by purchasing advertising). Myers acknowledges that this may promote dependency and discourage movement towards sustainability.

The report contends that ‘commercial’ media in Africa tends to focus on urban centers, owned by wealthy elites and airing mostly music and entertainment content out of either a financial agenda or fear of jeopardizing their investments with content critical of the reigning politicians. Myers cites media scholar Fackson Banda as suggesting that under these circumstances media liberalization may “offer more access and a stronger voice to the rich and powerful.” Both observations could be equally applied to developed media markets.

There are important conclusions to be drawn from this. The analysis highlights the candy/vegetable dichotomy in perception between ‘advertising-funded, high audience low-brow content’ and ‘wholesome donor-funded and donor-driven content consumed largely by donors.’ Good journalism, the logic follows, can’t make a profit.

There is a happy middle ground: not every piece of content produced by an outlet needs to be investigative reporting or educational information. Entertainment, sport and lifestyle sections can reflect the lives and desires of an audience, and they also appeal to advertisers wary of having their ads appear next to politics-focused content. Importantly, Myer observes that if commercial media thrives at a level that makes it attractive investment for the wealthy elite (not just politically but also economically), then there is actually a successful business model sustaining it—something perhaps worth investigating rather than dismissing as mass-market fluff. In some cases, it may be easier to encourage and help develop better journalism at a media outlet already operating sustainably, rather than funding a start-up and trying to create an audience from scratch.

Broadening access to capital beyond the political elite and lowering the cost of entry through technological innovation may encourage diversification of media ownership beyond wealthy elites. Key challenges are mitigating the risk of this investment and ensuring that independent media can confidently criticize the

establishment without existential repercussions. A large public (rather than donor) audience, convinced of an outlet's credibility and its consistent commitment to the standards of fair reporting, can be one such protection. Others are increasing the distance between an outlet and domestic authorities, operating online using overseas servers and rebroadcasting 'the last mile' locally.

# Mobile media services at Sub-Saharan African newspapers

**African Media Initiative**, July 2011

Kristina Bürén

<http://africanmediainitiative.org/content/2013/07/17/Mobile-Media-Services-at-Sub-Saharan-African-Newspapers-A-Guide.pdf>

If radio transformed the media landscape in Africa, mobile has done the same for telecommunications. Sub-Saharan Africa is the world's fastest growing market for mobile technology, and the second largest after Asia, according to the research firm Gallup.<sup>14</sup> The technology has leapfrogged decrepit landline infrastructure, and is proving dynamic and highly innovative. In Kenya, sending mobile phone minutes to other subscribers on a network became a way of transferring money domestically while avoiding the inconveniences of high inflation and inefficient banking; phone minutes became, in effect, a de facto gold standard. Rather than policing this practice, the Safaricom network made it official, calling the new service M-Pesa (mobile money) and the concept spread quickly around the region.

Published in 2011, this report by the Africa Media Institute (AMI) is a few years behind in its statistics, including on smartphone penetration rates and annual charges. But it does document these promising trends for developing media businesses. Moreover, it is aimed at publications themselves rather than donors.

Author Kristina Bürén is research director at the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA). She notes that the spread of the mobile money has led to an increasing amount of money 'stored' on phones, driving the use of paid SMS services which can be monetized by media outlets. Only a quarter of this revenue reaches the publisher and the remainder goes to mobile service providers, who generally seem unwilling to negotiate the subject. Nonetheless, publications in South Africa, Uganda and Kenya have managed to create an income this way (necessary, because print circulation revenues in Africa tend to be lower due to the practice of sharing each newspaper among eight or more people).

In the short to medium term, most publishers interviewed for Bürén's report saw the potential for mobile internet—a prescient view, given that smartphones in



2015 accounted for 15 percent of mobiles in Africa, compared to just 3 percent at the time of the report's release in 2011.

The combination of smartphones, mobile money and a young, social media-savvy demographic represents an opportunity for publishers and advertisers—and not necessarily just locally. Bürén's report notes that the most popular news website for Kenyan youth (those 18 to 25 years old) was the BBC's mobile-optimized site, "because it carried less local politics but more international news, more international sport, and more entertainment." This is insightful, and arguably a sign that Kenyan publishers are failing to meet the demands of this audience. Monetizing mobile news content is difficult, especially when users are unwilling to pay for bandwidth needed for video. However, the report does include examples of locally driven mobile innovations creating revenues for newspapers. To cite just two, *The Daily Monitor* in Uganda used paid SMS to successfully monetize a fantasy football game linked with the newspaper as the English Premier League unfolded, while South Africa's Avusa Group (which publishes *The Times*) launched a local Groupon-style service.

The report also includes a toolkit for publishers considering entering mobile, and includes an assortment of ideas for content services: city and entertainment guides, local news alerts, automatic classified advertising in the newspaper using paid SMS. Other monetization ideas included a "commercial SMS club," offering substantial member benefits to a premium audience—perhaps even tied into a print or online subscription. This part of Bürén's report is applicable to any media outlet exploring mobile, regardless of geographic location; her emphasis on the need to understand one's audience and the manner in which it engages with the news is universal. Indeed, sub-Saharan Africa's distinctive market characteristics aside, most of the challenges faced by the region's media are similar to those in more developed markets.

## VII. CASE STUDIES

*Case studies arranged by countries and ordered according to Reporters Without Borders' 2015 press freedom index (most free to least).  
Rankings shown in title.<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> 'World Press Freedom Index', Reporters Without Borders, <https://index.rsf.org/>, last accessed 10 October 2015

# ***THE CONVERSATION – Australia (25<sup>th</sup>)***



*Interview by JJ Robinson*

**Australia-based, university-funded news website publishing topical articles written by academics with deep subject expertise, guided by an editorial team.**

Journalists often have a complementary but uneasy relationship with academics. Research is often newsworthy, but academics can be justifiably concerned about a reporter's ability to quickly unravel a complicated subject they have themselves spent years seeking to understand. Journalists, for their part, might lack the researcher's deep subject matter expertise but be more effective at interpreting complex ideas for a general audience.

Daily news site *The Conversation*, launched in Australia in March 2011, is an attempt to overcome this problem by giving academics a forum to write while being guided by journalists.

## **SNAPSHOT - *The Conversation***

- 2.6 million monthly readers, 23 million global reach
- 25,000 registered authors
- 16 years - target reading age
- AUD\$4 million (US\$2.9 million) annual budget

## **INNOVATIONS – *The Conversation***

- Leveraging academic expertise and deep subject knowledge to produce accessible articles for public consumption
- Successful university 'subscription' funding model
- Franchising proven technology platform as a model for global expansion
- Free content under 'exposure' model cuts costs, benefits academic authors rather than exploits them (as it would a freelance journalist)
- Emphasis on credibility and independence as a means of differentiation in online publishing
- Syndication of high-quality content under creative commons as a way to boost exposure of publication and author—suitable only when both sides have alternate incomes
- Editorial charter and vetting process for authors to ensure disclosure of interests

“A lot of academics have had a bad experience with traditional media, feeling they have been misquoted or taken out of context,” explains *The Conversation’s* Managing Editor, Misha Ketchell.

Articles on *The Conversation* are written by academics in collaboration with the site’s editorial team. Some articles require little editing while others, perhaps too convoluted for the average audience, are almost completely rewritten. The academics are given final approval on everything from the content to the photo captions.

“We follow the news agenda, and when something happens, like Fukushima, we find academics who can help inform the public, someone with deep expertise and without vested interests,” explains Ketchell. “A lot of this information is already out there, but the problem is knowing whom to trust.”

*The Conversation’s* executive editor is Andrew Jaspan, a former editor of the *Melbourne Age*, *London Observer* and *The Big Issue* who later worked at Melbourne University. According to Ketchell, the idea for *The Conversation* arose after he noticed that the university was operating rather like a newspaper newsroom with each faculty a separate round: “The difference was that newspaper reporters started each day knowing nothing about the subjects they would be writing about.”

Jaspan’s idea was to bring academic expertise and analysis directly to the public in a manner that was timely and conformed to the news cycle. The Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University supported the idea, but was wary of *The Conversation* being perceived as a public relations effort if it was only supported by one university. He encouraged the broadening of the idea to encompass the entire university sector.

“We signed the universities on as funding partners, asking them to commit to the project for the benefit of their academics,” says Ketchell.

*The Conversation* functions like a normal newsroom with regular editorial meetings, though giving its writers near carte blanche makes for an eclectic front page: articles on the historical origins of ISIS, the conservation of orange-bellied parrots and open letters calling for bans on autonomous killer robots compete

with more mundane fare on Australian politics and dissections of the Chinese housing bubble.

All content is freely available and any academic can submit content, but universities are encouraged to subscribe and gain access to enhanced analytics. This model has been very successful. The site has an annual budget of AUD\$4 million (US\$2.9 million), half of which is funded by 34 Australian universities, each paying an annual subscription fee of AUD\$25,000-150,000 (US\$18,300-109,600) depending on size, says Ketchell, as well the Australian government's scientific organization, CSIRO. The remainder comes from private donations and corporate sponsorship, including a sizeable AUD\$800,000 (US\$584,000) contribution from Australia's Commonwealth Bank to fund the technology platform. A small sum trickles in from a jobs board containing university positions.

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"Independence might sound like a boring answer, but trust is such a valuable commodity in digital publishing."

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- *Misha Ketchell,*  
*Managing Editor*

Submissions are unpaid, substantially reducing the cost of content production, and are published under a creative commons license, permitting free republication with credit. As a result, academics published on the site are given a platform to showcase their research to an audience far wider than *The Conversation's* 2.6 million monthly readers. The site estimates its global reach at 23 million, via the 19,000 publications that syndicate its content, including such luminaries as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

"Most academics love getting their work republished and opening it to comments from colleagues," says Ketchell. "Public engagement is also increasingly encouraged by universities, and can be part of the career assessment process. They get a dashboard that helps them keep data on media follow-up, including Tweets and Facebook shares, and can use the data as part of their application for promotion."

A survey of the site's authors found that 60 percent had been called by media seeking follow-up, including 25 percent who were contacted for television appearances. Academic realpolitik means this exposure can raise the profile of an academic and help secure research funding, particularly for those in the early-to-

mid stages of their careers. “Points are scored for appearing in highly-ranked journals, but these are read by a small number of people,” notes Ketchell.

*The Conversation* is adamant about its editorial independence and insists it is not a PR service for its university backers. Any academic can submit content, not only those employed at subscribing institutions, and “funding universities don’t get special treatment,” says Ketchell. “If we do a piece on biochemistry, we will find the best. We are entirely agnostic.”

Australian academics are protected by the concept of academic freedom and are free to express views regardless of the corporate interest of the university they work for, Ketchell explains. “Most take this very seriously. The universities are used to putting up with academics being quite vocal.”

Moreover, most Australian universities receive some form of government funding which includes a certain commitment to public advocacy and engagement. “Universities all over the world are under pressure to better engage broader community,” Ketchell says.

The backbone of *The Conversation* is a custom-built content management system designed around a “baked-in” disclosure and sign-off process that prevents an editor from publishing an article until the author has approved every component of a piece. At first this was extremely frustrating for editorial staff used to competitive deadlines, admits Ketchell, “when we couldn’t publish copy for hours because an academic had disappeared.”

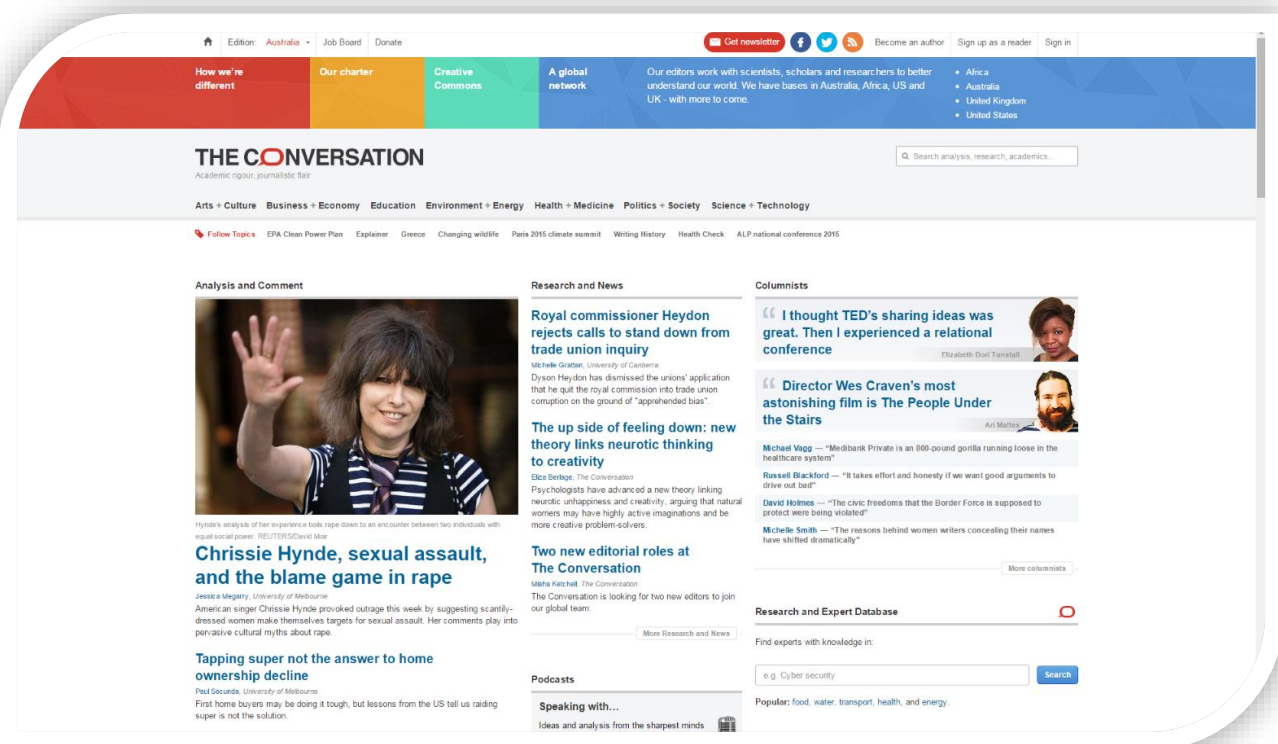
The current system encourages good behavior, ensuring academics to disclose conflicts of interest and prompting them to engage with their audience and respond to comments. Other components include a readability index to help authors “write to the readership of a 16 year-old.”

The concept has been successfully exported to the UK, US, Africa and is in the process of being adopted in France. Each outpost operates under its own jurisdiction, with *The Conversation* effectively licensing the CMS under a franchise arrangement, charging a fee for the use of the system. This allows each outpost to adapt a business model to its environment, says Ketchell. The British higher education funding body, for example, is less interested in supporting an

Australian website than a separate UK entity, while in South Africa, foundations provide support in lieu of cash-strapped universities.

The core value of *The Conversation* remains its credibility, explains Ketchell. “Independence might sound like a boring answer, but trust is such a valuable commodity in digital publishing. The online world has removed journalists as gatekeepers. Some of this has been good - small communities have been given voices. But it has also taken away the role of the journalist as police officer, making sure information is not contaminated; advertising dressed as editorial.”

The result has been “the best job I have ever had in journalism, and the most fantastic wonderful ideas-driven newsroom I’ve ever worked in.”



## **CRIKEY – Australia (25<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by JJ Robinson*

***Crikey* is a profitable independent news outlet based in Australia which publishes both a website and a daily paid email subscription newsletter. Founded in 2000, *Crikey* is known for its record of soliciting leaks and scandals from the upper echelons of Australian's political, business and media sectors.**

### **SNAPSHOT - *Crikey***

- AUD\$2.5-3 million revenue, "slightly profitable"
- 17,000 subscribers
- Revenue: 90% subscription, 10% advertisers

Founded in 2000, *Crikey* is one of Australia's first online news websites. Irreverent in tone and notorious for exposing the sordid goings-on in boardrooms across the Australian political, business and media spectrum, it has built a loyal following among the very targets of its journalism.

"People read it to see if they are going to be in it," says editor Marni Cordell, who has held the reins of the publication since early 2014. More remarkable than *Crikey's* longevity is the fact it is profitable.

"We've cracked the model," declares Cordell. "We've built a sustainable outlet able to pay staff and writers and make a small profit."

Such assertions are rare in a sector where the currently favored business model involves pleading eyes and a grant form. *Crikey's* business model surely demands analysis.

### **INNOVATIONS – *Crikey***

- Paid daily subscription email and a website with a two-week paywall (archive content is free). Has an 'audience as target' doctrine: the newsletter is valued by, and highly relevant to, those who are terrified of appearing in it.
- Successfully solicits tips and leaks from loyal readers inspired by its irreverent tone, reckless reputation and perceived willingness to take risks
- Free site allows non-paying audience ("squatters") to subscribe for 21 day trial, works to convert
- Reputation for being edgy and fearless, yet remaining 'behind the scenes,' maintains professional journalism standards



*Crikey* has a public website with selected stories and archived material, but it really represents a marketing tool for its main output: an email newsletter sent out at 1:00pm every day to 17,000 subscribers, each paying an average annual subscription of around AUD\$150 (US\$110). A feature of this newsletter is a listing of “tips and unsubstantiated rumors” submitted by readers, many occupying positions of power in the organizations they rat out. *Crikey* fact-checks these leaks and then writes them up into stories, many of which are then seized upon by the more mainstream media—to the tune of “at least one story a day,” according to Cordell.

Whistleblowers get the subversive thrill of outing the petty corruptions of the organizations they occupy, while remaining anonymous.

“*Crikey* has always thrived on leaks,” says Cordell. “It gives readers an insight into what is happening in powerful institutions, parliament, big business and the media. We have a very interactive readership; we get at least a dozen tips a day from readers.”

“It’s something people look forward to receiving—they hang out for their *Crikey* fix at lunch time. It’s unique: we’re not chasing ambulances or breaking news, but looking behind the scenes.”

*Crikey*’s small size (eight editorial staff) and alternative brand allow it to have a “lower evidence threshold than most newspapers,” says Cordell, adding: “though we don’t just run tips blind. We do a lot of checking and verify through our own sources.”

*Crikey*’s brand was keenly established by its founder, Australian journalist Stephen Mayne, who generated his own leads by becoming an ‘activist shareholder.’

Mayne would buy enough shares in a public company to entitle him to attend annual general meetings, and then run for board seats in an effort to expose the corruption, conflicts of interest and mutual backscratching of the old boys’ club of the Australian corporate world.

As a result, Mayne found that he had no shortage of enemies ready to pounce at the whiff of weakness—enemies he would enrage into error by openly antagonizing them. (One, a former political correspondent, physically attacked Mayne on stage in 2006 while he was presenting Australia’s Walkley journalism awards, leading the latter to quip that the prize was “sponsored by Fosters.”)

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**“We need to maintain the perception of being a ratbag publication, while at the same being respectable journalists.”**

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- Marni Cordell, Editor

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This baiting would have repercussions: Mayne ultimately had to sell his house to settle a defamation case against a former senator. His fortunes reversed in 2005 when an independent media group owned by former *Sydney Morning Herald* editor Eric Beecher bought *Crikey* for AUD\$1 million (USD\$728,000).

The shift to a more staid ownership challenged *Crikey*’s brand as the reckless underdog of Australia’s media scene. “I know it comes as a great shock that *Crikey* has any professional standards, but it does now,” snapped new owner Beecher, following the disgruntled public departure of one of its journalists in 2006.<sup>12</sup>

Ten years later, Cordell says, the operation remains “a fine dance. We need to maintain the perception of being a ratbag publication, while at the same being respectable journalists. Behind the scenes we take it very seriously; we don’t just run blind.”

He observes that *Crikey* retains its fearless reputation with at least one group: advertisers. *Crikey* subscribers tend to be older, 70 percent male, moneyed and educated to postgraduate level. Still, advertising accounts for only 10 percent of the publication’s revenue. “I think advertisers are nervous about aligning with the brand,” she says.

The key to *Crikey*’s success is the other 90 percent of its income: an estimated AUD\$2.5 (US\$1.8 million) in subscription revenue. It acquires new subscribers by converting what Cordell describes as “squatters”—readers who land on a paywalled article, and sign up for a 21-day trial to access it. The conversion rate, she claims, “is quite high.”

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Crikey! You’ve got to watch what you say’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <http://www.smh.com.au/business/no-crisis-at-crikey-says-private-media-chief-20140320-354b2.html>, last accessed 8/11/2015

While content available on the public site has varied (currently it paywalls the previous two weeks of content while offering archived stories for free), *Crikey* has effectively always charged for content through its subscription newsletter.

“*Crikey* was one of, if not the first news website to have a paywall, so it’s been a little easier for us,” says Cordell. “If you try to introduce a paywall to an audience used to receiving content for free that can be challenging. But that said, there are challenges in working with a paywall and social media. People can be reluctant to share your content to their friends who can’t access it.”

*Crikey* is currently celebrating its 15th anniversary with videos of mean tips submitted by readers being read out by their targets. ABC political correspondent Annabel Crabb, responding to a tip accusing her of compromising her professionalism with “a girly hairstyle, as if she was a maid of honor at someone’s wedding” retorts, “intellectually I understand the point, but my hair is very angry.” Queensland MP Graham Perrett, accused of being “wined and dined” by the mining industry, rejects the allegations: “We didn’t have wine, we had beer.”

Traces of the old irreverent *Crikey* remain, and the model seems to be thriving.



## **DAILY MAVERICK – South Africa (39<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interviewed by Kristen Grennan*

The *Daily Maverick* is an online news source that provides feature-length original stories as well as the opinion pieces of well-known South African thought leaders. While Internet penetration is high among the *Daily Maverick's* demographic, the considerable increase in mobile phone penetration poses challenge for the site's long-form style.

### **SNAPSHOT – *Daily Maverick***

- Annual expenses of US\$1 million
- Costs: 75% editorial, 25% other overhead
- 500,000 monthly unique visitors

The *Daily Maverick*, a South African website that publishes original, feature-length stories (as well as many opinion pieces from well-known South African thought leaders) launched in October 2009, after its founder Branko Brkic folded *Maverick Magazine* in 2008. “There were not many models [at the time] to look at so we let our senses guide us,” said Styli Charalambous, Publisher and Chief Executive Officer at the *Daily Maverick*. Today, the website's readership far exceeds the original magazine version, with approximately 500,000 unique visitors to the website per month.

When the organization first launched, Charalambous says, “we were looking for a more intelligent form of news for the web, when most publishers were reserving good content for their traditional media publications. However, today, “the government is clamping down on independent media and there is heavy political influence on media. The *Daily Maverick* has become fiercely independent as a result. We have chosen this editorial philosophy and that makes it even harder to survive when political influence compounds the economic pressures that abound in hard news publishing. Our new goal now is just to survive.”

### **INNOVATIONS – *Daily Maverick***

- Founded as a response to government clampdowns on independent media
- Hybrid advertising/donor/production services business model (60/30/10 split)
- Popular and credible platform attracts voluntary contributions
- Not-for-profit that receives funding for investigative journalism projects

The *Daily Maverick* uses several methods to raise funds. Advertising accounts for 60% of its revenue, although, Charalambous notes, “the state of digital media is out of sync with consumption. The value of online advertising is very low despite high consumption of online media.” Grants account for 30% of revenues. (*The Daily Maverick* has received grants from the Open Society Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Indigo Trust.) The outlet also hosts events and conferences, provides content syndication, has published two books, lends its brand to other publishers for business directories, and has started a production company that develops multimedia for corporations and not-for-profit organizations that require storytelling skills. These additional revenue streams account for 10% of the company’s revenue. The *Daily Maverick* particularly aims to grow in the areas of events and conferences, foundation grants, and content syndication.

This fundraising helps to support a team of 15 full-time salaried staff and approximately 200 contributors who are either paid per post or volunteer their writing in exchange for the opportunity to have their opinion heard on such a popular platform. All writers work virtually, since the *Daily Maverick* has no offices. According to Charalambous, “a lot of people want to write for us, so the *Maverick* attracts the best of the best.” Writers include high-level decision makers, senior politicians, and activists who write about topics that they are passionate about. Additionally, Charalambous notes, “we don’t have the biggest team, but we still cover more civil society news events than many other news sites.”

*Daily Maverick*’s demographic is highly connected to the internet. Therefore, being an internet-based website has not been an issue for the company. However, it is predicted that the next billion people will come online via mobile and will only have access to light web.<sup>13</sup> According to a Pew Research Center study, 89% of South African adults have a mobile phone—one of the highest mobile phone penetration rates in Africa and on par with the United States—and 34% have a smartphone.<sup>14</sup> As a result, as South African users gain internet access via their phones, *Daily Maverick* will face the new challenge of optimizing its long-form stories for smaller phone screens.

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<sup>13</sup> Bjarin, Ben. November 18, 2014. “Why the Internet’s Next Billion Users Will be Mobile-Only.” *Time*. <http://time.com/3589909/internet-next-billion-mobile/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center. April 15, 2015. “Cellphones in Africa: Communications Lifeline.” <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/04/15/cell-phones-in-africa-communication-lifeline/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

The ultimate goal of the organization is to “make a difference to the landscape: influence national politics, influence how people act, and be seen as a publisher of record, [so that] people to say, ‘I saw it [on the *Daily Maverick*] so it must be true’,” Charalambous says. As a result, the website caters to decision-makers across industries as well as politically active students, particularly among the educated, affluent middle class. *Daily Maverick*’s readers are so loyal that about half of its traffic comes from its homepage, meaning that a large portion of readers go directly to the website when they open the browser. Search comes in second, bringing in about 20-30% of readers, followed by Facebook and Twitter. The *Daily Maverick*’s daily newsletter also has 30,000 subscribers.

Charalambous says the publication could do more investigative journalism. However, for that, it needs grant funding. He feels that editorial independence could be compromised by advertising pressures. As a result, *Daily Maverick* has formed a not-for-profit arm that receives funding for investigative journalism projects. “We want to mirror *The Guardian* in that we want to create a sustainable operation and financial freedom without pressure of having to make huge profits, without worrying about corporations or the government pulling ad space. ... We are building something to continue in perpetuity and are unafraid to tackle any topic without fear.”

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# DAILY MAVERICK

## TOP STORY

### When bad leaders happen to good nations: Turkey's slide to tyranny

By RANJENI MUNUSAMY [WORLD](#) [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Google+](#) [LinkedIn](#)



"It's like snow in the summer", says Abdülhamit Biliç, director of Turkey's Cihan News Agency, about the systematic breakdown of the rule of law and erosion of democratic freedoms in his country. Perhaps that's the only way to keep going in the context of an assault on media freedoms, arrests of judges, manipulation of the judicial system, blocking of funding to aid agencies and raiding of schools – to see these as an aberration that will pass. Turkey is caught in a frightening maelstrom of corruption and the quest for untold power, a pseudo war against Isis and a real war against the Kurds, as well as a flood of Syrian refugees streaming through the borders. It is a world away from us but is a storyline that holds important lessons for South Africa. By RANJENI MUNUSAMY

## OPINIONISTS



IVO VEGTER  
The recalcitrance of rhino  
activists



ALISON TILLEY  
Should the people truly  
govern?



MMUSISI MAIMANE



## WE DO DIGITAL



DOWNLOAD

## **EYEWITNESS NEWS – South Africa (39<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by Kristen Grennan*

***Eyewitness News* is a syndicated radio broadcast and online news website that in April of 2015 became the first African news outlet to begin using WhatsApp as a way of communicating with its followers. While using WhatsApp is very labor intensive, it has had the unexpected benefit of increasing reader feedback and news leads.**

*Eyewitness News (EWN)* is a South African independent news outlet. *EWN* is owned by Primedia Broadcasting and launched as the company's news brand, providing news briefs for four South African radio stations. Today, *EWN* has an active online news platform that is continually trying to innovate. The site recently started a WhatsApp broadcast to communicate with its followers.

### **SNAPSHOT – *Eyewitness News***

- Costs of WhatsApp program: \$4,000 base costs, \$1,200 per month
- 8,000 WhatsApp followers
- 1.1 million followers across all social media

According to Deputy News Editor Camilla Bath, the idea for using WhatsApp, “came about by being plugged into what is going on at the *Oxford Mail* and publications in Sweden and the United States. We did a bit of research into how WhatsApp works in South Africa and found that there are about 10.6 million users. ... No one else in South Africa was doing this.” Recognizing that there was a market, *EWN* launched the WhatsApp version in April 2015 and “the response has been great.”

In recent years, news outlets have used a variety of messenger apps to reach out to their readers. The BBC has utilized apps such as Mxit in South Africa during an election, WhatsApp and WeChat in India during an election, and BBM, the former

### **INNOVATIONS – *Eyewitness News***

- Uses WhatsApp's broadcast feature to communicate with readers
- Costs are covered by the parent company and there is no pressure to create profits
- Uses JavaScript programs such as StoryMap, Odyssey, and Timeline



BlackBerry Messenger, in Nigeria.<sup>15</sup> Recently, the BBC has used WhatsApp in Sierra Leone and Viber in Nepal to share information and safety tips.<sup>16</sup> *The Oxford Mail* has been using WhatsApp since 2014.<sup>17</sup> The *Washington Post* used the WhatsApp chat feature in April 2015 to have an open discussion with British expats living in the United States about the British elections.<sup>18</sup> And in July 2015, *The New York Times* began a WhatsApp program where interested readers can receive updates from their Vatican correspondent.<sup>19</sup>

In the first three months of implementation, from April to June 2015, *EWN* has been able to manually add 7,930 subscribers. Subscribers are invited to join through *EWN*'s online platform but then need to be entered manually by *EWN* staff into the WhatsApp application. Each WhatsApp account can send out a broadcast to a maximum of 250 recipients as a blind carbon copy (BCC), allowing each recipient to respond directly to *EWN* without seeing who the other recipients are. Due to the nature of WhatsApp broadcasts, the process of adding new members and sending messages cannot be automated and therefore is very cumbersome and labor-intensive.

There are some costs to running the WhatsApp program, although they are limited. *EWN* currently needs four of the most up-to-date smartphones, costing approximately \$1,000 each, in order to have enough power to run the programs on the necessary scale and avoid malfunctions. *EWN* has also hired a staff person to run the program at \$1,200 per month. Additionally, three or four full-time staff spend thirty minutes to an hour per day crafting messages.

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<sup>15</sup> O'Donovan, Caroline. June 10, 2014. "Around the World, Media Outlets and Journalists are Using Chat Apps to Spread the News." *Nieman Lab*. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2014/06/around-the-world-media-outlets-and-journalists-are-using-chat-apps-to-spread-the-news/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>16</sup> Lichterman, Joseph. April 30, 2015. "In Earthquake-Ravaged Nepal, the BBC is Using the Messaging App Viber to Share Information and Safety Tips." *Nieman Lab*. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/04/in-earthquake-ravaged-nepal-the-bbc-is-using-messaging-app-viber-to-share-information-and-safety-tips/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>17</sup> *Oxford Mail*. October 19, 2014. "Free: Get Oxford Mail News Alerts Sent Directly to Your Phone Via WhatsApp." [http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/11252030.New\\_Get\\_Oxford\\_Mail\\_news\\_alerts\\_sent\\_direct\\_to\\_your\\_phone\\_via\\_Whatsapp/](http://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/11252030.New_Get_Oxford_Mail_news_alerts_sent_direct_to_your_phone_via_Whatsapp/). Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ahuja, Masuma and Michael Gold. April 14, 2015. "Join Us on WhatsApp to Discuss the British Election." *Washington Post*. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/ask-the-post/wp/2015/04/14/join-us-on-whatsapp-to-discuss-the-british-election/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>19</sup> Weissman, Cale Guthrie. July 6, 2015. "The New York Times has its Vatican Reporter Using WhatsApp to Send Short Updates to Readers." *Business Insider*. <http://www.businessinsider.com/new-york-times-whatsapp-experiment-2015-7>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

Two broadcasts containing the top five to seven stories from the *EWN* website are sent out daily on the WhatsApp broadcast. Bath pointed out that the stories include national, international, and “soft” news, as well as important local information such as the weather and planned power outages.<sup>20</sup> The tone of the content is also, “a lot cheekier and informal. We try to stick to that chat format that WhatsApp is all about.” Interestingly, subscribers have been responding via WhatsApp directly to *EWN*. According to Bath, “people are very chatty. They respond to us and tell us what they think about stories or the selections. It’s a powerful tool for news tipoffs as well. You create a community. People see you as a person or entity rather than a service. It is remarkable how diverse it is.”

Fortunately for *EWN*, the project is supported and funded by the parent company, Primedia. Primedia is a South Africa-based media and advertising firm that manages advertising opportunities, radio stations, out-of-home media, content distribution, gaming and digital platforms. It also owns South Africa’s largest cinema chain, post-production and animation facilities, as well as a business in the music streaming industry.<sup>21</sup> Starting in 2013, Primedia began expanding to other African countries.<sup>22</sup> The Primedia Group is backed by other powerful firms—Mineworkers’ Investment Company, Brait Entities, the FirstRand Group and the Old Mutual Group—who are now Primedia’s major shareholders.<sup>23</sup>

Primedia uses *EWN* as its breaking news outlet which feeds content to its broadcast companies. As a result, *EWN* is an internal service within Primedia Group and is not expected to independently generate revenue. The same is expected of WhatsApp. According to Bath, “WhatsApp was never meant to be a revenue generator; it was more of a community builder. There have been inquiries from advertisers wanting to advertise on the WhatsApp broadcasts. We do not want this very new product to be overtaken by advertising in its initial stages, so we’ve held back from advertising.”

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<sup>20</sup> South Africa’s electric utility companies have regularly planned power outages as the demand for power has outstripped the supply. More information is available at: Wexler, Alexandra. “Power Outages Mar South Africa’s Economic Expansion.” *Wall Street Journal*. 8 May 2015. Accessed: 7 August 2015.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/power-outages-mar-south-africas-economic-expansion-1431077401>.

<sup>21</sup> “Our Company.” Primedia. <http://www.primedia.co.za/about/our-company/>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Despite oversight from a parent company, Bath points out that “*Eyewitness News* is lucky in that we operate very independently. Even from our parent company, we have independence. ... We don’t have to kowtow to anyone.”

Additionally, Bath says, Primedia and *EWN*’s support for WhatsApp is part of a larger policy supporting media and technology advancement. The *EWN* team has begun working with JavaScript programs such as StoryMap, Odyssey, Timeline, and others in order to tell engaging and interactive stories. Bath notes that this environment is not the norm in most newsrooms: “We are lucky in this newsroom to play quite a lot. We love innovation, we love to harness the latest tech and tools out there. The future depends on where WhatsApp takes it product. We can only do as much as what WhatsApp allows us to do.”

*EWN* sees opportunities in expanding the WhatsApp program into areas such as traffic or sports news broadcasts, but the cumbersome nature of the app limits *EWN*’s ability to expand. The current success of the project, though, is marked by the fact that the organization’s TV newsroom/industry competitor eNCA has recently introduced a WhatsApp broadcast as well.<sup>24</sup>

South Africa enjoys one of the highest phone penetration rates in Africa, on par with Nigeria and the US at 89% of the population (compared to 83% in Ghana, 82% in Kenya, 73% in Tanzania, and 65% in Uganda). A considerable percentage of South Africans have smartphones (34%, compared with 27% of Nigerians, 15% of Senegalese, 15% of Kenyans, and 14% of Ghanaians).<sup>25</sup>

South Africa also has an internet penetration rate of approximately 22.7% (only outpaced by Nigeria, which is at 57.7%).<sup>26</sup> As more people in South Africa gain internet and mobile access, Bath points out that WhatsApp makes sense for *EWN*: “The next billion people who come online will do so mostly on mobile, so that is where we want to be.”

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<sup>24</sup> ENCA. July 10, 2015. “WhatsApp with eNCA.” <http://www.enca.com/south-africa/whatsapp-enca>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Center. April 15, 2015.

<sup>26</sup> EMarketer. November 20, 2014. “Internet to Hit 3 Billion Users in 2015.” <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Internet-Hit-3-Billion-Users-2015/1011602>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

## NEWS TOOLS – South Africa (39<sup>th</sup>)



*Interviewed by Kristen Grennan*

**NewsTools is an online data visualization resource for the public and news outlets to check the amount of plagiarism that can be found in an article, a trend referred to as “churnalism.” NewsTools hopes to create a badging system where readers and newsroom managers can quickly see if an article has been checked for its level of “churnalism.”**

### **SNAPSHOT – NewsTools**

- Tools to find copied content, most original content, track how news is changed over time, and who is most quoted
- 70% donor funded

NewsTools is a data visualization site that hopes to improve the diversity of sources in South African media. Their website’s products include a “Churnalism” tool which allows users to copy and paste a news article to see if it has the exact same content as another news site (a common problem in South Africa); Churn Trends, which allows users to see what news outlets have the most original content

and which do not; NewsDiffs, which tracks how content on news sites has changed over time; and Media Mic, which allows users to easily see who is most quoted in the news.

NewsTools is a project run by the South Africa-based media non-profit Media Monitoring Africa. This organization aims to promote the development of a free, fair, ethical and critical media culture in South Africa and the rest of the continent by improving media ethics, quality, and freedom.<sup>27</sup> According to the Director, William Bird, “We [at Media Monitoring Africa] were looking at media and realized that people are just reusing [news from other sites]. ... We found that

### **INNOVATIONS – NewsTools**

- Uses data visualization to easily connect readers and news outlets with data on news source originality
- A badge system to accredit those news outlets that have the greatest original content
- The project is open-source and available to other organizations to replicate

<sup>27</sup> Media Monitoring Africa. “Who We Are.” <http://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/index.php/about/>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

there is a general lack of diversity [in sources].” To combat this regurgitation of news, Media Monitoring Africa entered the idea for a website that would be user-friendly and provide key information on sources and plagiarism (at that time called MoJo) to the Africa News Innovation Challenge in 2012 and succeeded in obtaining funding.<sup>28</sup>

However, beyond the initial funding for the project, more will be needed to continue promoting the tools and to supplement the cost of creating updates and adaptations.<sup>29</sup> For example, Media Monitoring Africa hopes to build a “media quality indicator” that uses NewsTools to indicate which news outlets have the most original content. There is also the possibility for NewsTools users, particularly media journalists and staff, to be able to log in, search NewsTools analytics on the site, and then compare and store the data.

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**“The digital realm is still quite new and it is important to indicate where the good news is.”**

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- William Bird, Director

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Moreover, NewsTools could even be incorporated into the content management systems (CMS) of new outlets for ease of use. Finally, Bird pointed out that their tools have been building, “a really good database to find trends about content,” which could be helpful for news outlets and data analysts to understand long-term trends in South African journalism. Looking to the future, Bird noted, “We’re optimistic about funding [for these projects].”

Media Monitoring Africa is also hoping to build a paid badging system that encourages news outlets to avoid “churnalism” and rewards diverse content. “We wanted to promote positive [change], so if the content is good, [the news outlet] can get a badge and be alerted if people copy from them,” said Bird. Bird hopes that the badging system the site is developing will provide the funding necessary to keep NewsTools sustainable.

Bird pointed out that “in South Africa, there is a dire limit of people with data skills but they are becoming increasingly necessary,” noting out that only one

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<sup>28</sup> African News Innovation Challenge. “2012 Winners.” <http://africannewschallenge.org/2012-winners/>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

<sup>29</sup> Newstools is now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> version, according to Bird.

newsroom in the country had a data journalist: the *Mail & Guardian*. He says that lack of funds is a major reason why newsrooms have not taken up data journalism, noting: “Using digital does things faster and more efficiently, but it is still labor intensive.” Additionally, South Africa has limited press freedoms—a factor that, Bird says, is pressuring media outlets to move towards “churnalism.” “Threats to media freedom limit innovation,” Bird warned.

Other concerns are limited Internet penetration and varying levels of digital literacy in South Africa. South Africa has an internet penetration rate of approximately 22.7% (only outpaced by Nigeria, which stands at 57.7%).<sup>30</sup> Additionally, according to Bird, the cost of internet is quite high. Digital literacy is also low, says Bird; a single household may have digital-savvy users, but in the next one, users may have no knowledge of what the internet is or how it is different from Facebook. “This makes it hard to adjust,” to the needs of the population, he notes. Additionally, as new people enter the digital sphere, they may not be aware of the quality of different news outlets and how to decipher which ones are reliable: “The digital realm is still quite new and it is important to indicate where the good news is.”

What is exciting about NewsTools is that it provides data visualization tools not found anywhere else in the world—but it does not have to be that way. When NewsTools first received funding, it hoped to model the Churnalism tool on a UK site with a similar tool. However, the tool turned out to be inadequate and ineffective for their needs (particularly because it was not open-source) and as a result the NewsTools team created their own open-source tools for any coder or website to pick up and use anywhere in the world.

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<sup>30</sup> *EMarketer*. November 20, 2014. “Internet to Hit 3 Billion Users in 2015.” <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Internet-Hit-3-Billion-Users-2015/1011602>. Accessed: 8/15/2015.

# OXPECKERS – South Africa (39<sup>th</sup>)



*Interviewed by JJ Robinson*

***Oxpeckers* is a small investigative media outlet in South Africa that covers environmental issues in the region, with a particular focus on poaching. The outlet makes particular use of data mapping tools to track poaching syndicates and official corruption.**

*Oxpeckers* is a non-profit outlet founded by veteran South African environmental journalist Fiona Macleod, after she became one of 20 winners of the 2012 African News Innovation Challenge (ANIC).

## **SNAPSHOT – *Oxpeckers***

- US\$78,000 annual budget
- 80-90% funded by donors and grants, 10-20% syndication revenue
- Launched with seed grant of \$40,000 over two years

Named after a bird which perches on large mammals such rhinoceroses and plucks parasites off them, *Oxpeckers* specializes in covering stories related to poaching. The site's journalists obtain datasets and map instances of poaching onto a map of southern Africa displayed on the site. They also track arrests and follow corruption cases in courts across the region.

Rhino conservation efforts were a South African success story, bringing the animal back from the brink of extinction in the 1970s. In 2010, the country's 18,796 white rhinos and 1,916 black rhinos represented 93% and 40% of the world's rhino populations respectively.<sup>31</sup> However booming demand for rhino horn on the black

## **INNOVATIONS – *Oxpeckers***

- Small and lean independent news outlets can innovate speedily and with less investment than large mainstream publications
- Focus on producing good content with integrity, and this will get noticed
- Careful allowing republication of content if this will appear in a competing publication

<sup>31</sup> 'Poaching crisis in South Africa', Save the Rhinos, [https://www.savetherhino.org/rhino\\_info/thorny\\_issues/poaching\\_crisis\\_in\\_south\\_africa](https://www.savetherhino.org/rhino_info/thorny_issues/poaching_crisis_in_south_africa), last accessed 14/8/2015



market has led the number of rhinos poached in South Africa to rise from 13 in 2007 to more than 1000 in 2014,<sup>32</sup> turning a conservation triumph into a tragedy.

“Rhino poaching is a very big story in South Africa, a conversation topic,” explains Macleod. “The government was regularly releasing data on poaching incidents, and we thought it would make a good example for how geomapping can be used to tell stories.”

A journalist for many years at publications including the *Mail and Guardian*, Macleod felt that if environmental journalism was to “survive into the new era”, it needed to pick up the techniques of new media “and stay abreast of trends in changing world.”

*Oxpeckers* successfully pitched the idea to ANIC, created the map and began uploading all the poaching data issued by governments in the region, mostly in South Africa and Namibia. It began to follow arrests and trials and collecting data on court cases, aiming to post one investigation a week. Gradually, it began expanding its environmental remit beyond rhino poaching and wildlife trafficking. “We are currently working on green alert platform that collects data and maps environmental impact assessments,” Macleod says. “We’re creating a similar platform, #GreenAlert, mapping mining licenses issued throughout South Africa, and building a climate change tracker to show the impact of climate change in the country.”

ANIC’s initial seed grant consisted of US\$40,000 given in a series of tranches over two years, while Code for Africa lent technical expertise and support towards setting up the site.

“Now because of the quality of our investigative journalism and interest in our geomapping and data analysis there is lot more interest in what we doing,” says Macleod. Further support arrived from groups such as the African Media Initiative and the Earth Journalism Network, as well as the Open Society Foundation for South Africa, various environmental conservation organizations and journalism schools.

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Rhino poaching statistics’, South African Department of Environmental Affairs, [https://www.environment.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/rhinodialogues/poaching\\_statistics#2014](https://www.environment.gov.za/projectsprogrammes/rhinodialogues/poaching_statistics#2014), last accessed 14/8/2014



*Oxpeckers* currently receives 80 to 90 percent of its funding (around US\$78,000) from grants and donors, with the remaining 10 to 20 percent earned income from syndicating its stories. Macleod says that she is open to advertising, but currently doesn't have an advertising representative and is cautious of the time and energy required. For now, *Oxpeckers* receives a lot of interest from other platforms wanting to use its content, but is careful giving permission lest it undermine *Oxpeckers'* own traffic.

"Sometimes [syndication] can be a source of income, but budgets in the mainstream media are shrinking and [for publications like *Oxpeckers*] it's a decision of whether you want the publicity, or are they competing with you? We produce investigations on *Oxpeckers* and we don't want to be driving readers to [competitors'] sites."

Besides Macleod, *Oxpeckers* has an administrative assistant and a network of associate journalists across Southern Africa.

"Part of our mandate is to mentor aspiring environmental journalists," says Macleod. "We set up fellowships, usually 2-3 months, and it has been very successful."

She says that she "does not want to be in the position of hiring people full-time, sitting doing 8am-5pm days. For me what works is to keep it small, stay in budget, and not overpromise and then end up in trouble. Only spend what you have," she advises.

"Integrity is important as well. It shines through; if you are doing the work, people will pick up on that. It not about sounding fantastic and pumping yourself up when you can't back it up."

While a small publication might not be able to plan big undertakings, staying lean means you can innovate quickly: "The nature of mainstream organizations is that they can't move as fast, and they do try something, they tend to try it on a big scale," says Macleod.

# INVESTIGATEWEST – USA (49<sup>th</sup>)



*Interviewed by JJ Robinson*

**Investigative non-profit covering the Pacific Northwest, founded in 2009 in the wake of mass newspaper redundancies and the closure of the Seattle PI.**

*InvestigateWest* is a not-for-profit investigative news agency covering the Pacific Northwest, emerging after a wave of newspaper layoffs in 2008 that saw 5,900 newsroom job losses across the country—a decline of 11.3 percent.<sup>33</sup> *InvestigateWest* was founded in the wake of the closure of the print edition of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, which had been in circulation since 1863.

## SNAPSHOT – *InvestigateWEST*

- Annual budget: \$270,000
- Income: 70 percent foundations, 15 percent earned income, 15 percent donations
- Indirect reach in 2014: 2.6 million

The founders of *InvestigateWest*, all former *P-I* journalists, were concerned about the effect that these dramatic changes to the industry would have on the profession's role in holding power accountable. They felt that for more than a hundred years, the most original investigative reporting had been produced by newspapers, and that the loss of these would be most keenly felt in areas below the radar of the large national publications.

“There are gaping gaps in accountability at state and local level in the US,” says *InvestigateWest*'s Associate Director, Jason Alcorn, pointing out that the Washington State legislature passes twice as many bills as Congress, many of them relating to climate policy, trade agreements, and corporate juggernauts

## INNOVATIONS – *InvestigateWEST*

- Crowdsourcing funds for specific reporting projects
- Focus on small donors, growing this with events and outreach
- Paid Facebook promotion to put stories in front of a particular geographic audience
- Target under-reported local/regional issues with eye for national syndication
- Per-project fee plus syndication revenue-share with contributors

<sup>33</sup> 'U.S. newsroom employment declines', American Society of Newspaper Editors 2009 census, <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=121&sl=151&contentid=151>, last accessed 8/14/2015

such as Boeing, Microsoft and Amazon. “A lot of the best accountability journalism is locally sourced and grows into a national issue. Local and regional media have a strong legacy of breaking stories nationally.”

*InvestigateWest*’s 2009 launch was an attempt to counter this loss of coverage, and put it at the forefront of the then emerging trend in the US of civic-minded philanthropic journalism. “The goal early on was to figure out how to do that. In 2009 there were few models to follow,” he says.

*InvestigateWest* has offices in Seattle and Portland and employs two full-time staff, including Alcorn who handles the grant-making and development side of the business. The publication has editorial staff on retainer for copyediting and other tasks, while contributors are usually paid per project rather than by the word. “We’re asking more from our contributors: data sets, public records, iPhone photography,” explains Alcorn. If a story is picked up and syndicated, the contributor will usually be offered a revenue share.

*InvestigateWest* measures two different audiences. Its direct audience includes site visits (100,000 in the first six months of 2015) and newsletter subscribers (1,500). Alcorn estimates a total indirect reach of 2.6 million in 2014, including the publication’s syndicated reach and social media impressions (100,000 from Twitter and 70,000 from Facebook).

“Compared to a site reliant on advertising, this is very little of a traffic game for us,” he says. “Our approach is that we like as many eyeballs as possible on stories we are producing, but we don’t produce stories to chase eyeballs.”

The publication did little to optimize its web reach (search engine optimization), believing, instead, that that what was useful to readers was also likely to impress a search engine. At the same time, *InvestigateWest* tried out a six-month marketing campaign on Facebook, paying \$12-18 per story to get articles onto the newsfeeds of 6,000-8,000 people in its target geography and interest area. The trial was successful enough that it is building an advertising budget into future grant budgets, with an investment of \$50-100 per story to flood the newsfeeds of the relevant demographics.

While *InvestigateWest* is structurally and aspirationally similar to large not-for-profit nationals that have also emerged in recent years, such as *ProPublica* and *The Intercept*, Alcorn says that it had very little of their initial market capitalization. Nobody was footing the bill for a 3-5 year start-up project, which made it critical to quickly grow earned income and a base of regular donors.

“We’re not billionaire-founded. We’ve been bootstrapped all along, which is true for all regional local investigative [publications],” says Alcorn. *InvestigateWest* was founded “with zero dollars,” its founders working unpaid for six months before drawing initial support from the Bullitt Foundation (a Seattle-based foundation with assets of \$104 million in 2010). This first break was critical, says Alcorn, as *InvestigateWest* was competing with big national organizations “and money follows money in the philanthropic world.”

In 2014 foundations were still responsible for 70 percent of *InvestigateWest*’s \$270,000 annual budget, while earned income of 15 percent came from syndication arrangements with an assortment of media partners, including *The New York Times*, KUOW Public Radio and KCTS9 Television.

The remaining 15 percent is revenue from individual donations and recurring monthly memberships (of which the site currently has 120), ranging from \$5-42. Alcorn says growing this figure is *InvestigateWest*’s main business objective, as the spread of income provides both financial stability and freedom from the demands of advertising or large donors. Advertisers tend to shy away from marketing on investigative journalism websites, he suggests.

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**“It is good business to have a financial relationship with a collaborator, rather than one of goodwill.”**

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- Jason Alcorn, Associate Director

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However, expanding and cultivating a broad donor community is difficult and requires a long view. *InvestigateWest* holds events, outreach programs, even private house parties “where we serve wine and cheese, I give my talk, and we pass the hat round at the end of the night. People do not care about journalism with a capital ‘J’, but they are interested in the story of journalism: how you got a story, sources, whistleblowers, how freedom of information works. These events are a key way for us to build our audience. It

takes a long time to grow a large donor base, and there's no shortcut - you have to recruit personally."

*InvestigateWest's* regional focus lends itself to this grassroots approach, since small donors tend to be drawn in by their own roots in the region. A regional profile not only appeals to this base of potential members but also mitigates competition with large national philanthropic outlets like *ProPublica* that have multimillion-dollar budgets.

"Our goal with *InvestigateWest* is to be around for a long, long time," says Alcorn. "I don't see anyone else credibly filling our role in the Pacific Northwest." *InvestigateWest's* survival over the past six years would seem to vindicate its regional focus, demonstrating that people are willing to fund meaningful journalism where this is seen to be in sparse supply.

*InvestigateWest* recently received its first five-figure check from a donor, and it has also had recent success crowdsourcing funds for specific projects, raising \$15,000 to put a reporter inside the state legislature. The outlet monitors the impact of its coverage; a 2011 story about the health of chemotherapy workers exposure has led to laws improving safety, while a series on water quality standards exposed an error in the state's method of accounting for toxic pollution.

Earned revenue, on the other hand, has been "very variable." But Alcorn says that this remains very important for the publication's credibility: "It is good business to have a financial relationship with a collaborator, rather than one of goodwill."

Six years after the upheaval in the media that led to its inception, Alcorn says *InvestigateWest* and other investigative non-profits like it are "now at an inflection point".

"Six years is an achievement, but it has taken many organizations six years of upheaval, uncertainty and experimentation to see what the future looks like. That's not to say there isn't still room to innovate, but I think we've largely moved past that now and have much a clearer idea as to what constitutes good ideas and bad ideas for investigative non-profit journalism. That's exciting, and I think we'll see a lot of growth in the next couple of years."

# NEWS DEEPLY – USA (49<sup>th</sup>)

*Interview by JJ Robinson*



***News Deeply* is a template for the rapid deployment of single subject news websites, offering in-depth reporting on specific subject as needs arise. It currently has sites covering the ongoing conflict in Syria, the Ebola outbreak in Africa, and the California water crisis.**

*Syria Deeply* was founded in December 2012 by former Middle East correspondent at ABC and Bloomberg, Lara Setrakian, with the intention of bringing all information about the ongoing conflict into one source. The site aggregates articles about Syria from many sources, as well as producing its own content. Interactive maps show the number of casualties in different areas, and background material explores the origins of the conflict and the rise of ISIS.

## **SNAPSHOT – *News Deeply***

- A model for single-subject sites, currently publishing on three topics: *Syria*, *Water* and *Ebola Deeply*
- Claims up to 60% return rate
- Average 8 minute user dwell time on site

*Syria Deeply* was a model for what Setrakian would describe as ‘hypertopical’ journalism, compensating for the mainstream media’s broad focus and short attention span with in-depth reporting on a neglected niche issue.

“The focus on a niche topic captures a smaller audience than mainstream news outlets, but with a higher loyalty and intensity of engagement within that audience as measured by user return rates,” she wrote in a 2014 study she co-authored for the Tow Center. “The demand for in-depth news coverage by niche audiences is spawning new salable products for the digital marketplace.”

*Syria Deeply* claims a 60-percent return rate and an average dwell time of eight minutes, and in 2013 would win a National Press Foundation award for Excellence in Online Journalism. The site became a model for its parent company, *News*

## **INNOVATIONS – *News Deeply***

- Single subject sites can engage experts to build reputation and help circulate within their own networks
- Template model for sites allows rapid deployment when issues or stories arise
- Foundations and brands prefer to support topics rather than specific organizations

*Deeply*, which subsequently launched *Ebola Deeply* (covering the outbreak in West Africa) and *Water Deeply* (the Californian water crisis).

Lydia Laurenson is *News Deeply's* Director of Strategy and Research. She explains the company generates an income through web-related project consultancies with groups such as the World Economic Forum, as well as philanthropic funding and sponsorships for specific websites.

"We start talking with brands and philanthropic organizations before launching each site," explains Laurenson. "Some philanthropy covers operating costs for the entire organization, but many brands and foundations want to be affiliated with a particular topic."

One of *Water Deeply's* supporters, for instance, is the Anheuser-Busch beer company, although no such advertising appears on the site. The company, says Laurenson, is interested in how the California drought is relevant to brewers and participating in roundtables with high level industry experts. *Ebola Deeply* was part sponsored by the search engine Yahoo!.

The decision to create a *Deeply* site is foremost an editorial one, she explains: "We choose *Deeply* topics based on whether a topic has both a high need for information and a high opportunity for impact. We don't choose *Deeply* topics based on what corporations would like to cover, although we partner with organizations with an interest in our topic areas. We are also happy to develop white-label projects that cover topics chosen by other organizations, following our high-quality journalistic standards."

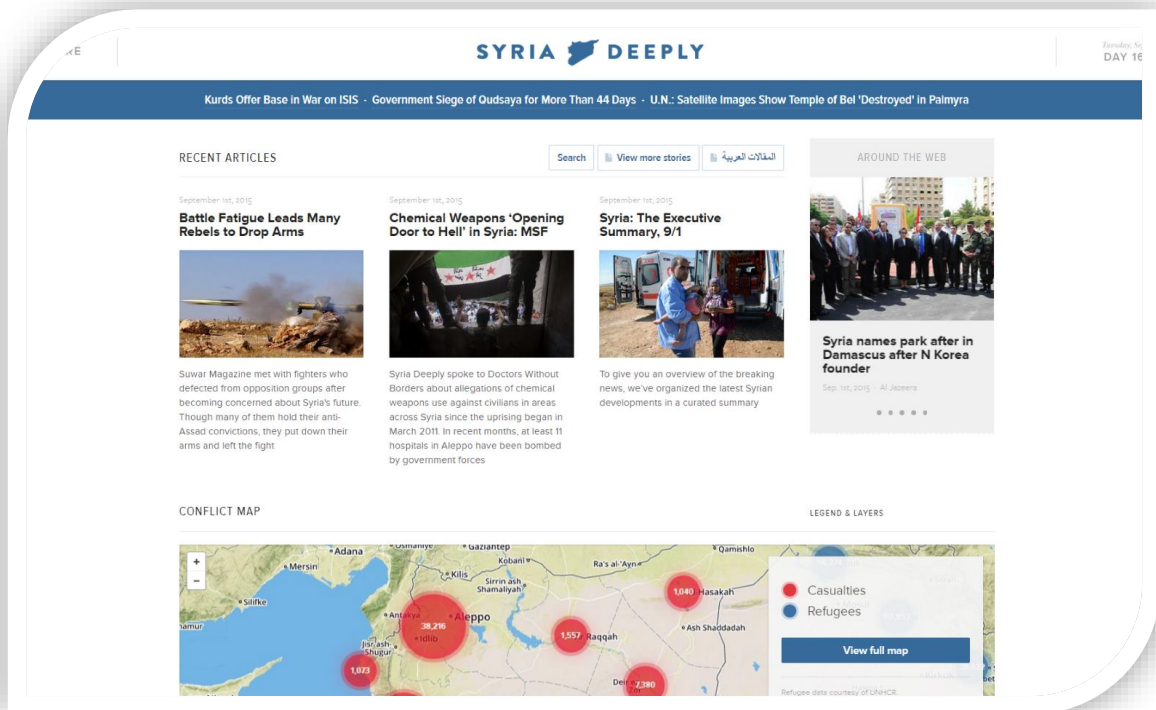
Audiences for the new sites are boosted by enlisting expert advisory boards, who help circulate the site among their own networks - *Water Deeply's* advisory board, for example, includes a physicist and hydrologist. Each is run by a managing editor who runs a network of freelancers.

As issues become resolved and the need for sites like *Ebola Deeply* diminishes, News Deeply is developing a process of 'sunsetting' to turn these into an archived resource.

"We're in the process of sunseting *Ebola Deeply*, which means we will redesign the site as an ongoing educational resource and memorial to the professionals who lost their lives fighting the disease. We've committed to retaining the

archive,” says Laurenson. There are currently no plans to wind down *Syria Deeply* or *Water Deeply*, as both of these issues are still very much ongoing.

*News Deeply* is currently considering topics for its next site. With its tested template, these can be quickly deployed based on need and opportunity, without the months of development required for a conventional news start up.





# OCCRP - Bosnia and Herzegovina (66<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Kristen Grennan*

**The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) is a non-profit organization based in Eastern Europe that is the only investigative reporting network focused on organized crime and corruption.**

The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) uses a network of 20 partner organizations throughout Europe and Central Asia to track cross-border organized crime and corruption and utilizes multimedia to disseminate its investigative reports. As a result of its work, OCCRP has been widely praised by international journalism organizations while also facing pushback in the form of threats, smear campaigns, and arrests.

OCCRP is a not-for-profit, joint program of a number of regional non-profit investigative centers and for-profit independent media stretching from Eastern Europe to Central Asia.<sup>34</sup> The organization covers investigative journalism and breaking news as well as acting as a resource center for those researching organized crime and corruption. Co-founder and executive director Paul Radu says that OCCRP is the only investigative reporting network focused on organized crime and corruption.

## **SNAPSHOT - OCCRP**

- 95% funded by grants
- Total 2014 expenses: \$1.5 million
- Facebook likes: 21,500
- Twitter followers: 4,200

The organization was started in 2006 when two directors of organized crime investigation centers, Paul Radu in Bucharest (where he had founded the Romanian Center for Investigative Journalism in 2003<sup>35</sup>) and Drew Sullivan in

## **INNOVATIONS – OCCRP**

- Network of partner organizations coordinating to publish on websites and social media
- Emphasis on using multimedia, such as data visualization, photo, and video, in order to explain complex organized crime and corruption trends
- Large collective is able to better defend its journalists from legal harassment

<sup>34</sup> "About Us." OCCRP. <https://www.occrp.org/en/about-us>. Accessed: 8/27/2015.

<sup>35</sup> "Paul Radu." JSK. <http://jsk.stanford.edu/fellows/class-of-2010/paul-radu/>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

Sarajevo (where he founded the Center for Investigative Reporting in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2004<sup>36</sup>), recognized that if they joined forces, they could have a greater impact.

They started with a project called “The Power Brokers,”<sup>37</sup> in which Sullivan and Radu collaborated to uncover how electricity traders in the Balkans abused their power by charging high costs for low-quality electricity to the regions’ poorest people. Afterwards, they sought funding from the United Nations and decided to create OCCRP in order to continue to undertake these kinds of investigative reporting projects. As Radu points out, “This [organization] grew organically from stories—not the other way around.”

Since “Power Brokers,” OCCRP has published more than 25 investigative projects and has also begun producing documentary investigations.<sup>38</sup> In 2014, OCCRP released the documentary *Killers Inc.*, which revealed a transnational network of assassins for hire. The film resulted in the banning of a pro-Russia political party of the key interlocutor Renato Usatii from the Moldovan state elections. Another OCCRP documentary, *Jailcrunch*, was a series of interviews with convicted criminals in Eastern Europe to uncover first-hand accounts of how organized crime works in the region.<sup>39</sup>

In 2014, OCCRP released 68 in-depth stories by more than 90 journalists in 20 countries.<sup>40</sup> One project, “YanukovychLeaks,”<sup>41</sup> contributed directly to multiple prosecutions and six Interpol warrants, including the warrant for Viktor Yanukovych, ex-president of Ukraine. Another, “The Russian Laundromat,”<sup>42</sup> caused the National Crime Agency to investigate 19 companies in the UK, as Russian police announced that it was investigating the withdrawal of 700 billion rubles from Russia via 21 banks, and Moldovan authorities launched their own investigation. A project called “The Two Bosses”<sup>43</sup> was published while Fahrudin Radoncic was running for president of Bosnia and Herzegovina and may have

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<sup>36</sup> “Drew Sullivan.” *ICIJ*. <http://www.icij.org/journalists/drew-sullivan>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

<sup>37</sup> This project can be found at: <https://www.reportingproject.net/powerbrokers/> (accessed: 8/24/2015).

<sup>38</sup> List of projects is available here: <https://www.occrp.org/en/projects> (accessed: 8/24/2015).

<sup>39</sup> “Annual Report 2014.” *OCCRP*. [https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP_Annual_Report_2015.pdf). Accessed: 8/24/2015.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> This project can be found at: <http://yanukovychleaks.org/en/>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

<sup>42</sup> Project available here: <https://www.reportingproject.net/therussianlaundromat/>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

<sup>43</sup> Project available here: <https://www.reportingproject.net/twobosses/index.php>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

contributed to his failure to win. And “Unholy Alliances”<sup>44</sup> investigated the banking system and organized crime in Montenegro.<sup>45</sup>

All of these projects utilized a variety of media, such as video, data visualization, photo, and text, to explain the complex web of organized crime. According Radu and Sullivan, “we want to present the results of our reporting to the public in ways that everyone can use, with the help of tools that make data easier to search and to present – while making it harder for organized crime to hide.”<sup>46</sup>

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**“In reality, we are doing very little work compared to the corruption and organized crime out there.”**

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- *Paul Radu, Co-founder*

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As a result of this work, OCCRP has been recognized with a number of journalism awards, including USAID Journalism Award, BOBS Award, M100 Media Award, 2015 European Press Prize nominee, 2015 European Press Prize Special Award, and many more.<sup>47</sup>

Since 2006, OCCRP has grown into a transnational project with 160 journalists investigating crime and corruption, including Miranda Patrucic, Stevan Dojcinovic, Mihai Munteanu, Roman Anin, and Vlad Lavrov. They have 35 full-time staff and hire additional short-term programmers, visual artists, and journalists when new investigative projects arise. The organization relies on grants, accounting for 95% of their revenue, and commercial activities (consulting, training international media organizations, and other projects) accounting for the other 5%. In 2014, OCCRP won \$1,110,003 in grants, receiving \$657,091 from the Swiss Government (Romania), \$146,872 from the Open Society Institute (Regional), \$139,820 from the International Press Institute, \$83,240 from ICFJ (RIJN Program), \$66,727 from Open Society Institute (Media Ownership), \$15,000 from Google, and \$1,253 from SUNY (USDoS).<sup>48</sup> OCCRP made \$86,999 through consulting and other projects.<sup>49</sup> In

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<sup>44</sup> Project is available here: <https://www.reportingproject.net/unholyalliances/>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

<sup>45</sup> OCCRP. 2015. “Annual Report 2015.” [https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP_Annual_Report_2015.pdf). Accessed on: 7/24/2015.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. See page 56-61 for full list of 2013 and 2014 financial statements.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

2014, OCCRP's expenses were \$1,543,164, approximately 88% of which were for program services.<sup>50</sup>

As Radu and Sullivan realized early on, organized crime organizations are most effective when they collaborate. According to Radu, "OCCRP acts as an umbrella organization to the partner centers and funds investigative stories among them while simultaneously building capacity and providing technical assistance. It takes on costs that no one center could afford, like media insurance, access to commercial databases and hiring programmers. OCCRP [also] hosts the websites of six partners. "

OCCRP's partners consist of twenty organizations throughout Europe and Central Asia<sup>51</sup> that work with the OCCRP headquarters to develop their investigative journalism projects. When a project is finished, the affiliated organizations coordinate to publish the information on their websites and social media outlets. The OCCRP headquarters assists the local centers with editing, publishes English and Russian versions of the projects, pushes project information out to international news outlets, and provides the local centers with liability insurance. According to Radu, this ensures that the public and government officials are aware of organized crime activities: "You need a network to fight a network."

To find sources for these projects, OCCRP reporters start by mining available databases and then move to human sources. According to Radu, only 30% of the data they need is available online. When necessary, "we work with activists to pressure, even sue, governments for data," he said. For example, in Montenegro, local activist group MANS has used OCCRP stories to file criminal complaints against the government. Additionally, OCCRP stories were featured in a number of reports by organizations such as Transparency International, which applies pressure on governments to reform and increase transparency.

As a result of this system of partner organizations, according to OCCRP's 2014 annual report,<sup>52</sup> the organization's reach has spanned Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, the US, and the UK. This work led law enforcement to freeze or seize more than \$2.5 billion in assets. Authorities have found \$600 million in

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> A full list of members and their descriptions are available here: <https://www.occrp.org/members> (accessed: 8/24/2015).

<sup>52</sup> Available here: [https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP_Annual_Report_2015.pdf) (accessed on: 8/24/2015).

hidden assets; closed more than 1,000 companies; and investigated, indicted or arrested 79 persons. Ten government officials resigned or were sacked, and governments changed twenty laws, rules or regulations.<sup>53</sup>

This success has given rise to OCCRP's biggest concerns: pushback from governments and organized crime groups. For example, OCCRP correspondent Khadija Ismayilova in Azerbaijan has been arrested a number of times by the government on trumped-up charges, such as incitement, suicide, embezzlement and abuse of power, and slander.<sup>54</sup> At this time, prosecutors have asked for 9 years for Ismayilova and a verdict is expected on September 1, 2015.<sup>55</sup>

Another OCCRP correspondent, Slovenian reporter Anuska Delic, has been accused of publishing classified state intelligence, which could result in a prison sentence of up to three years.<sup>56</sup> OCCRP has also been the target of threats and smear campaigns in Montenegro and Slovenia following the publication of "Unholy Alliances" (focusing on the interaction of organized crime, government and business in Montenegro)<sup>57</sup> The smear campaign has been particularly vicious in Montenegro, targeting OCCRP and its Montenegrin partner organization MANS as well as several individual journalists and editors.<sup>58</sup>

Additionally, in Russia, Azerbaijan, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia, there is evidence of surveillance on OCCRP investigators.<sup>59</sup> Radu notes that OCCRP will defend itself and partners in court if necessary, but they will continue to do their work unintimidated, knowing that eventually they will overcome these threats: "We let our words speak for themselves."

Despite this serious threat to the sustainability of the organization, Radu notes, "we have been doing this for a good number of years and these are good times for investigative journalism. There has been an increase in transparency, data, and the ability to follow the money. ... [OCCRP] will continue to grow. ... There are lots of opportunities for international journalists to collaborate [across borders]."

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<sup>53</sup> OCCRP. 2015. "Annual Report 2015." [https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.occrp.org/documents/OCCRP_Annual_Report_2015.pdf). Accessed on: 7/24/2015. Numbers updated by Paul Radu in an email to Kristen Grennan on 8/25/2015.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Email correspondence between Paul Radu and Kristen Grennan, 8/29/2015.

<sup>56</sup> OCCRP, "Annual Report 2015."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

In terms of financial sustainability, OCCRP continues to diversify its funding, particularly in local centers, and it has had some success in the area of crowdfunding. Radu projects that in 2016, the organization will grow to about \$2.4 to \$2.5 million in expenditures and it is on track for financial success. “We grew rapidly and now we need to put more structure into what we are doing... We want the local centers to be successful. Ultimately, we want to leave behind local centers that can survive without the centralized structures,” said Radu.

When looking to the future, OCCRP is interested in developing more investigative reporting and finding new patterns and ways to undertake it. The organization seeks to use technology innovations to create tools such as the Investigative Dashboard, a searchable repository for companies or persons of interest.<sup>60</sup> According to Radu, “what we are trying to create is a stronger connection between investigative reporting, programmers, and artists. ... We visualize our investigative reports to broaden our reach.”

Despite these efforts, OCCRP has much work ahead of it. “In reality, we are doing very little work compared to the corruption and organized crime out there,” Radu says. Eventually, OCCRP hopes to use technology and its collective knowledge to track crime trends, make communities and government aware of these trends, and neutralize situations to prevent the right environment from forming. For example, according to Radu, organized crime is a “commodity” which has patterns and can be tracked across borders. Often, when organized crime groups are pushed out of a community, they simply move to another, often across borders. If authorities can track an organized crime group through these movements, it could prevent business as usual from repeating itself. Without an international network like OCCRP, however, this kind of cross-border tracking and prevention would be impossible.

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<sup>60</sup> More information about the Investigative Dashboard available here: <https://investigativedashboard.org/about/> (accessed: 8/24/2015).

## OJO PUBLICO – Peru (92<sup>nd</sup>)

Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery



***Ojo Publico* is a digital investigative journalism start-up focused on covering political, social, and environmental news in Peru. The site relies on donations from international organizations and is working to implement a subscriber-based model. *Ojo Publico*'s editors hope to achieve profitability by 2016.**

### SNAPSHOT – *Ojo Publico*

- 70% of revenue from donations
- 30,000 unique visitors per month
- Goal of selling 2,000 subscriptions by the end of 2016

*Ojo Publico* is one of Latin America's most celebrated digital media start-ups. Founded in 2014 by Editor in Chief Oscar Castilla and a team of four other veteran journalists, the site now publishes in-depth investigative reports on Peruvian politics, society, and business while remaining entirely ad-free. Castilla says that he founded the site out of frustrations with working in Peru's traditional media. He says that *Ojo Publico* is now the only site of its kind in the country.

"We actually started out with the idea of being a non-profit. But we are in the short term working to develop content that can earn money. It's a mixed model," he says. Unlike most other media start-ups, the team at *Ojo Publico* are eschewing ad sales as a source of funding. In addition to looking for funding from organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation, Hivos International, and the Knight Foundation, *Ojo Publico* has also created a "Club of Friends" to allow readers to help sponsor particular projects. Castilla says that *Ojo Publico* will also shift towards a subscriber-based model. He's confident that the site has earned enough of a strong reputation to make the paywall model work.

"We are going to start selling subscriptions. We want to have 2,000 subscribers by the end of 2016," he says. Among Latin America's new generation of digital media

### INNOVATIONS – *Ojo Publico*

- Donation-based model helps preserve editorial independence
- Maintaining small staff helps keep costs low
- Subscriber-based model provides guaranteed revenue
- Through *Ojo Publico*'s "club of friends" readers can sponsor investigative projects



start-ups, *Ojo Público*'s model is unique but Castilla is optimistic that it can work. "We have a strategy that we think is well-rounded. We aren't experts at business management or marketing, but we think that by generating good content, utilizing digital resources, and fostering engagement with the audience we can achieve success similar to MediaPart in France—they only have income from subscribers. But, we also don't discount the idea of receiving financing from foreign organizations," he says.

Currently the site pulls in 70 percent of its revenue from donations. Because *Ojo Público*'s focus is investigative journalism, Castilla thinks it is important to avoid any potential conflicts of interest with advertisers. "Advertising can be a problem because we never know if we'll end up investigating a company that buys ads. So, in our case, advertising could end up being a conflict of interest," he says.

Many of *Ojo Público*'s most successful articles focus on analyzing the impact of Peru's multibillion-dollar mining company and the effects of mineral extraction on the country's people and environment. In a decentralized political system where the president is relatively weak, big companies can exert an inordinate amount of power. Mining exports totaled more than \$23 billion in 2013 but were also associated with serious political conflicts and protests in the rural, mostly indigenous communities where the mines are located.

According to the World Bank, only a fifth of Peru's population lives in poverty, but much of this poverty is concentrated in rural areas. Peru's media sector is seen as facing serious constraints from politicians and business leaders who can threaten to sue journalists for reporting on reputation-damaging issues. Defamation is a criminal offense in Peru and in recent years multiple editors and journalists have fought to avoid prison for their journalism work. Especially in mining regions journalists face serious risks for trying to disrupt the arrangements between mining companies and local politicians. For this reason, *Ojo Público*'s donation-based model provides an important buffer and allows for editorial independence.

"Our ultimate goal is creating credible content for citizens—our end users. We want to change public policies and become a source of reference in South America. We think [*Ojo Público*] should be independent and separated from commercial interests," Castilla says.



## RootIO – Uganda (97<sup>th</sup>)



*Interviewed by Kristen Grennan*

**RootIO is a low-cost, low-energy radio station platform designed specifically for remote, low-resource communities that have little to no access to media.**

**RootIO's use of a smartphone app allows broadcast hosts and callers to call in to radio shows from their personal mobile ("feature") phones for free. RootIO hopes that hyper-local advertising will help reimburse broadcast hosts and callers for the cost of charging their mobile phone to make the call.**

RootIO is a low-cost radio station (thanks to new innovations in technology) that is geared towards rural communities lacking access to hyper-local media—or, often, any media at all. While radios seem like a tool of the past, RootIO is quite innovative in its low-cost technology and infrastructure that utilizes mobile phones paired with inexpensive FM transmitters. "What is different about this method is that it has low set-up costs and low running costs so that a small community can afford it," says co-founder Chris Csikszentmihalyi.

### SNAPSHOT – RootIO

- Each station costs \$2,300 to start up
- RootIO stations broadcast at a range of 20-30km
- RootIO stations need a small solar panel, battery, 15-metre-tall transmitter tower, a smartphone, and a 19-litre bucket

RootIO was founded in 2013 by Csikszentmihalyi and Jude Mukundane. Csikszentmihalyi cofounded and directed the MIT Center for Future Civic Media and founded the MIT Media Lab's Computing Culture group.<sup>61</sup> Mukundane works with Uganda Telecom as Head of VAS and Technology Innovations to devise

### INNOVATIONS – RootIO

- Mobile-based radio broadcasting reaches areas with no internet access, potentially opening up new markets and audiences
- RootIO radio stations utilize low-cost, low-energy resources, are FM frequency, and are hyper-local
- Stations are connected via a free Android app, which allows stations to syndicate content that can be heard on FM radios
- Callback system makes listening free for the end user

<sup>61</sup> "About." RootIO. <http://rootio.org/about>. Accessed: 8/24/2015.

innovative ways of harnessing telecommunication technologies for service delivery.<sup>62</sup> In 2013, *RootIO* received \$200,000 in seed money from the Knight Foundation, via the Knight News Challenge, in order to move forward on its testing in Uganda.<sup>63</sup> *RootIO* has also partnered with the Uganda Radio Network, UNICEF Uganda, UNICEF Innovation,<sup>64</sup> and the Resilient Africa Network (RAN) laboratories (a project under Makerere University School of Public Health, funded by USAID)<sup>65</sup> in order to research and execute the project.

The radio station is currently running its first projects in four communities in Uganda: Aber in the Oyam District, Pabbo in the Amuru District, Patongo in the Agago District, and Kitgum Town.<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, *RootIO* hopes to bring its low-cost radio stations to communities around the world.

In Uganda, access to the internet is limited, with only 16% of Ugandans accessing the internet in 2013<sup>67</sup> and only 0.11% of Ugandans having a fixed-broadband subscription.<sup>68</sup> However, According to a 2014 Nielsen study, Ugandans have approximately 97% radio penetration.<sup>69</sup> Additionally, the simple “feature” phones commonly found in rural communities also have radios built into them, meaning that anyone with a radio or a simple mobile phone can listen in.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Knight Foundation. January 17, 2013. “Eight Mobile Phone Ventures Win \$2.4 Million in Funding Via Knight News Challenge.” <http://knightfoundation.org/press-room/press-release/eight-mobile-ventures-win-24-million-funding-knigh/>. Accessed: 8/24/2014.

<sup>64</sup> Ellis, Justin. January 18, 2013. “RootIO Wants to Take Radio Back to the Local Level in Uganda.” *Nieman Labs*. <http://www.niemanlab.org/2013/01/rootio-wants-to-take-radio-back-to-the-local-level-in-uganda/>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>65</sup> Genrwot, Jedy. May 27, 2015. “Meet RootIO: A Community Radio Innovation that Uses a Cellphone to Broadcast.” *PC Tech Magazine*. <http://pctechmag.com/2015/05/meet-rootio-a-community-radio-innovation-that-uses-a-cellphone-to-broadcast/>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>66</sup> Resilient Africa Network. “First Community Radio Station-RootIO Launched in Aber Sub-County, Oyam District Uganda.” <http://www.ranlab.org/first-community-radio-station-rootio-launched-in-aber-sub-county-oyam-district-uganda>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>67</sup> Freedom House. 2014. “Freedom of the Press 2014: Uganda.” [https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-of-the-press/2014/uganda#.VamDN\\_IVg3E](https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-of-the-press/2014/uganda#.VamDN_IVg3E). Accessed 7/17/2015.

<sup>68</sup> ITU. 2014. “The World in 2014: ICT Facts and Figures.” *ITU*. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2014-e.pdf>. Accessed: 8/31/2015.

<sup>69</sup> Nielsen. 2014. “Nielsen Emerging Market Insights, Country Snapshot: Uganda.” <http://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/nielsen-global/ssa/docs/nielsen-emi-uganda-snapshot.pdf>. Accessed 7/17/2015.

According to the Pew Research Center, 65% of Ugandans own a mobile phone (60% own a feature phones and 5% own smartphones).<sup>70</sup> However, Csikszentmihalyi points out that due to limited access to electricity, charging phones is a challenge in rural Uganda. He estimates that less than 10% of mobile phones in rural areas are on or charged. Furthermore, due to costs, many people in rural communities have limited credit. Therefore, people in rural areas will not turn on their phone unless they need to send a text message; then, they quickly turn the phone back off to save energy.<sup>71</sup> In contrast, radio receivers use batteries that last much longer and one radio can be used to play for an entire family or village at once.

In order to make *RootIO* low-cost for communities to use, the tools required to execute the stations are minimal. First, the supplies needed to create the stations are simple: a small solar panel, battery, fifty-foot-tall transmitter tower, a smartphone, and a 5-gallon bucket to house the hardware and keep it dry.<sup>72</sup> These minimal tools stand in stark contrast to the normal costs of a radio station: “[A typical radio station in Uganda] may have about 1.5 million listeners each and uses a 3,000-watt transmitter. With our method, one small community only needs a 20 watt transmitter,” explained Csikszentmihalyi.

The cost difference is significant: a typical radio station in Uganda could cost \$50,000 per year to run, according to Csikszentmihalyi. However, starting a *RootIO* station only costs \$2,300 (or UGX 8 million),<sup>73</sup> most of which is currently covered by local organizations or grants from international funders such as Knight and RAN. Current deployments are experimenting with local revenue generation through ads, announcements, and sponsored NGO programming. The reduced wattage and the use of solar panels also allow the station to run in communities without electricity infrastructure.

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<sup>70</sup> Pew Research Center. April 15, 2015. “Cell Phones in Africa: Communications Lifeline.”

<http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/04/15/cell-phones-in-africa-communication-lifeline/>. Accessed 8/31/2015.

<sup>71</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Chris. January 30, 2013. “Knight News Challenge: Mobile Winner RootIO.” *Knight Foundation*. <https://vimeo.com/57823885>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>72</sup> Yoquinto, Luke. May 27, 2015. “New Ugandan Radio Stations Run on Sun, Smartphones and Buckets.” *New Scientist*. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22630232-100-new-ugandan-radio-stations-run-on-sun-smartphones-and-buckets/>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>73</sup> *Resilient Africa Network*. “First Community Radio Station-RootIO Launched in Aber Sub-County, Oyam District Uganda.” <http://www.ranlab.org/first-community-radio-station-rootio-launched-in-aber-sub-county-oyam-district-uganda>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

To further reduce costs, *RootIO* uses a new “call-out show” method that allows a community radio host to run a show via his or her phone and allows community members to call into the show for free right from their mobile phones. For example, in Aber (Oyam district, Northern Uganda<sup>74</sup>) volunteers record 10 minute news broadcast via their phone that is re-broadcast throughout the day, thanks to an Android app that the station’s smartphone runs off of.<sup>75</sup> This Android app also allows smartphones at each community radio station to communicate with *RootIO* cloud servers so that they can syndicate content.<sup>76,77</sup>

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**“Essentially, the cloud creates a conference call between the caller, the host, and the Android phone running the station, broadcasting the conference over FM.”**

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- Chris Csikszentmihalyi,  
Co-founder

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Volunteers also conduct a 30-minute program about a specific issue. They announce during the program that they are able to take callers. Callers then can dial in to the answering service and hang up after a few rings. The answering service (which runs off the *RootIO* cloud server) records the numbers, and when radio hosts are ready to take callers, they simply press a button on their basic mobile phone, and the service will call back the callers, allowing the callers to participate at no cost. According to Csikszentmihalyi, “Essentially, the cloud creates a conference call between the caller, the host, and the Android phone running the station, broadcasting the conference over FM.”

Csikszentmihalyi pointed out that in the future *RootIO* stations can use ad revenue to cover the fees for the radio host. Additionally, a small payment can be given to callers to reimburse them for the electricity they needed to use to turn on their phone and call in. According to Csikszentmihalyi, “Many more people will engage if it is free. However, battery power is still an issue, since having the opportunity to charge your phone may be limited in rural areas.”

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> For more information, see: Yoquinto, “New Ugandan Radio Stations.”

<sup>76</sup> Yoquinto, “New Ugandan Radio Stations.”

<sup>77</sup> For a more detailed explanation of how the app works, see: Csikszentmihályi, C., and Mukundane, J. 2015. *RootIO - Platform Design for Civic Media*. In: *Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial Research Through Design Conference*, 25-27 March 2015, Cambridge, UK, Article 19. DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.1328001. [http://files.figshare.com/1967051/RTD2015\\_19\\_DAY2\\_PM\\_Csiks\\_273.pdf](http://files.figshare.com/1967051/RTD2015_19_DAY2_PM_Csiks_273.pdf). Accessed: 8/25/2015.

In the village Patongo, the radio station is managed by a local HIV-focused women's organization, Gwokke Keni. Prior to *RootIO*, the founder of Gwokke Keni, Jane Adong, would ride 10 hours to the capital via motorcycle to host a 30 minute radio program on HIV in the capital, costing them UGX 1 million.<sup>78</sup> Now, thanks to the low-cost *RootIO* station, Gwokke Keni can save on travel time and use that same amount of money to fund a community station directly in Patongo. Additionally, whereas their program at the capital was only 30 minutes, now they host radio programs several hours per week. Even better, because *RootIO* is hyper-local, broadcasting at a range of only 20-30km, Gwokke Keni is able to target the show's discourse around the needs of their own community. Because of this hyper-local content, "These stations and call out shows can help solve community issues," said Csikszentmihalyi.

At the moment, local organizations such as Gwokke Keni help to manage the stations and defray some of the basic costs. However, *RootIO* is continuing to look into other options for community- or regional-based funding. One option they are considering is having expats fund individual stations; another is to tap into crowdfunding to help many people chip into parts of a station. While ads are the main method of funding for a standard radio station in Uganda, it is still uncertain if ads be effective at the hyper-local level. At *RootIO* they are hopeful that ads will be possible, particularly as a low-cost equivalent to classified listings that can prove particularly useful in communities where literacy rates are low.<sup>79</sup>

Because *RootIO* aims to be community-run and low-cost, the organization keeps staff and offices limited, with the goal of making them obsolete. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "We want this to be a free platform that others can take on." In order to install stations, they do hire some temporary staff, the cost of which is often covered by the community-based organizations that are sponsoring the stations. The current *RootIO* team consists of the two founders (Csikszentmihalyi and Mukundane) and two field staff members, Moses Odokonyero and Gladys Oroma, both of whom have journalism and media experience.

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<sup>78</sup> For more information, see: Yoquinto, "New Ugandan Radio Stations."

<sup>79</sup> Yoquinto, "New Ugandan Radio Stations."

As reflected in the backgrounds of their field staff, “we have a strong commitment to journalistic integrity,” Csikszentmihalyi explained. To help their stations access quality news without having to become investigative journalists themselves, *RootIO* has partnered with the Uganda Radio Network to provide stations with national news that they can broadcast through the app. Furthermore, *RootIO* has teamed up with the North Uganda Media Club (NUMC) to draft *RootIO*’s editorial policy as well as provide journalism trainings to stations.

The overall media climate in Uganda is tense. According to *Freedom House*, “Uganda’s press freedom environment deteriorated in 2013, due in large part to the government’s 10-day closure of two major media houses in May.”<sup>80</sup> Since then, the situation improved slightly, although “journalists continued to face intimidation and harassment from state and nonstate actors, at times engendering self-censorship.”<sup>81</sup> “There is currently an open question to everyone in Uganda about independent news and freedom of the press,” reflects Csikszentmihalyi.

Additionally, a major hurdle to journalism as well as to open data competitions in Africa is the quality of available data, particularly from the government. Csikszentmihalyi noted that sometimes NGO data is more accurate or more complete than government data, even though this data is often overlooked. “Most of these development programs or open data contests are trying to replicate what is happening in Silicon Valley. They are having open data challenges without paying attention to the government data that is being produced—and without looking at NGO data. We know that NGOs are a major economic and cultural force in the developing world, and that governments are relatively ‘thin.’ Shouldn’t NGOs be imbricated in open data standards? The



A working prototype RootIO station operating in Gulu, Uganda. Solar panel on roof. Photo: *RootIO*

<sup>80</sup> *Freedom House*. “Freedom of the Press 2014: Uganda.” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/uganda#.VdyG5CVVhHw>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>81</sup> *Freedom House*. “Freedom of the Press 2015: Uganda.” <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2015/uganda#.VdyHiCVVhHw>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

challenges in Africa are different challenges than in the US. You really can't just try and replicate Silicon Valley in Africa and expect it to work."

*RootIO* is still in its early stages and is currently finishing up its first round of testing in Uganda, meaning that the next six months will be pivotal in determining its future and impact. "We are trying to do this so that this program can be anywhere, even Switzerland or the United States, where there might not be any local news," says Csikszentmihalyi. Furthermore, *RootIO* seeks to ensure that the shows are affordable and easy enough for community members to create radio shows on their own. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "These communities don't have access to peer-to-peer communication," and that is the gap that *RootIO* is hoping to address.

The results of this testing phase in Uganda are encouraging. According to Csikszentmihalyi, "So far, indications are positive: the technology is working, there is community interest, and there is market interest." *RootIO* currently has four stations in rural Uganda that are run by community groups (which all have ICT knowledge, thanks to past NGO or UN support) and can be heard by approximately 15,000 people each (Csikszentmihalyi points out that the exact number of listeners will be investigated in the coming months). "The point of these current stations is to find out what is the right size for rural communities," says Csikszentmihalyi, "How big should a station be? How much should a wedding announcement cost to sustain a not-for-profit station?"

Over the next six months, *RootIO* seeks to answer these questions and draw conclusions from this initial phase. As for the future, Csikszentmihalyi points out that the station is in need of "finding partners who are interested."



# MASHALLAH NEWS – Lebanon (98<sup>th</sup>)

Interview by Odharnait Ansbro



**Voluntary collective of journalists, graphics designers and editors who aim to highlight the neglected stories of ordinary people across the Middle East, focusing on urban, social, cultural and political change.**

## **SNAPSHOT – Mashallah News**

- 7,000 followers across Twitter and Facebook
- 200 contributors
- Supported by an \$87,000 grant from the EU and Canal France International

*Mashallah News* was set up in 2010 by five people—two journalists, a graphic designer, one student and one editor—who wanted to show a picture of the Middle East that was true to what they had experienced after living, working and traveling in the region. Tired of seeing the Middle East portrayed in the mainstream media as a place of conflict and political upheaval, they aimed to highlight the

stories and voices of ordinary people across the region, who live in surprising and creative ways. Mashallah is an expression used across the Arabic-speaking world, Turkey and Iran to express surprise and delight, a bit like the English word “wow.” True to its name, *Mashallah News* shares “disOriented stories” of the unexpected—local cultural and creative initiatives, changes in the urban social, political and environmental landscape and the continuing fight for rights—through a mix of music, photography, poetry and prose.

*Mashallah News* initially began as a small project, publishing through a Wordpress-hosted platform. It has since expanded into a fully developed website with content from over 200 contributors. An interactive map on the homepage takes the reader to stories in different places across the Middle East. The team plans to improve the map by linking to content from other sources as well as their

## **INNOVATIONS – Mashallah News**

- Began as a small project publishing through a Wordpress-hosted platform, and received a grant to evolve into a website
- Voluntary contributors produce free content, but still require admin and business skills to coordinate
- Interactive map to navigate content



own, to create a picture of all content relevant to a particular location. In this way, *Mashallah News* aims to “reorient” the reader to the daily lives of citizens and their worlds, away from the national and regional narratives that emphasize politics over people.

The pieces on the site range from an examination of street art across the Middle East, to the poems of a Palestinian writer trying to process the trauma experienced by her family, to writers in Istanbul documenting the surrender of civic spaces and homes to the privatized agenda of the ruling party. These voices amplify the progressive mindset of people, many of whom live under repressive regimes. “The repressive elements are the institutions: the governments, the political elites and the religious organizations,” says Jenny Gustafsson, one of the co-founders. “The citizen voices in these countries are not repressive. ... Working within these repressive spaces triggers a very progressive mindset in people.”

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**“I wish we had more [languages]. It directly affects your reach.”**

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- Jenny Gustafsson,  
Co-founder

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As *Mashallah News* evolved over the last five years, the editorial team has begun a series of theme pieces on topics that include history, poetry, food, nighttime and migration. The next theme, due to be launched this year, will be language. Last year, with the help of a Bourse Déliées award of about \$9,200 financed by the government of Geneva, the team branched into print for the first time, producing an anthology of its collected works called *Beirut Re-Collected*. They have also held in-person events around the region as well as in Paris and Geneva, including debates on censorship and journalism in Iran, book readings, film screenings and cultural gatherings.

Staffed entirely by volunteers, *Mashallah News* needs funding. It has been difficult for staff to find time and mental space to dedicate to the project given their other work commitments. The key challenge is “finding a good balance in terms of how much voluntary work you can do,” says Gustafsson. “When it becomes too much and too heavy, you lose the creativity behind it.” Apart from proceeds from selling the book published last year, *Mashallah News* has no sources of commercial revenue. Before receiving a year-long EU grant in 2013, the staff ran *Mashallah News* platform without any funding. The grant, called the 4M

Ebticar Grant, was awarded in partnership with the French media organization, Canal France International and amounted to about \$87,000. It allowed the team to build a fully developed website, currently in beta version, and produce three multimedia series. They hope to continue enhancing the website and to produce more printed series, but that will depend on receiving additional funding.

Infrastructural deficiencies are a problem. Team members are located across different countries and rarely get to meet in person. Poor internet quality makes it difficult to communicate virtually and work collaboratively. *Mashallah News* lacks a strategy for growth and expansion. Although the staff are committed to continuing the website, they don't have a strategy to increase its followers or expand into other media. Gustafsson highlighted the lack of strategic thinking, planning and management as something that inhibited the growth of the platform, along with the resources that would be required to make it happen.

Asked how the team would like the site to evolve, Gustafsson expressed a desire to do a greater amount of translation of their work into different languages. "Not many publications are bi- or trilingual," she says. Having more languages "directly affects your reach. We wanted to be able to translate [more] pieces into Arabic and Turkish but you need to be able to pay a translator." Ideally the team would like to publish every story in French, Arabic and English but this is once again impossible due to the lack of funds.

As well as enhancing the map on the site to link to content on other websites, the team would like to have a more fluid integration of their website content and social media channels, as this is the primary means by which readers access content. Currently *Mashallah News* uses social media to promote individual pieces, linking directly to each one, thus skipping the interactive map and the homepage. The staff would like to give users a more integrated experience, possibly linking each piece directly to its locale on the map and other content related to its theme.

The *Mashallah News* team clearly has the editorial, creative and content development skills needed to make the site a success. But in order for it to grow, they need additional resources, mentoring in business development and strategic planning, and the technical support of a web developer.

# Agência Pública – Brazil (99<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Carolina Araujo*

**Agência Pública** (“Public Agency”) is a non-profit Brazilian news agency focused on investigative journalism, launched in March 2011 by three journalists: Natalia Viana, Marina Amaral and Tatiana Merlino. The latter quit the project in its first year, and the other two are currently *Pública*’s directors.

The partnership between them began a few years earlier, when Viana worked as a reporter at *Caros Amigos* magazine, a monthly printed publication that provides

analysis, news and opinion with a left-wing lens on politics and the economy. The magazine was founded and owned by Amaral at that time.

## **SNAPSHOT - Agência Pública**

- Crowdfunding campaign raised \$23,000 for 10 investigative projects
- Content republished by 60 outlets
- Total staff: 10

*Pública*’s mission is to “produce high-quality non-partisan investigative reporting guided by public interest, on Brazilian and Latin American current important issues from the people point of view, in order to strengthen the right to information, and

to facilitate democratic debate and promotion of human rights.” The agency does investigative reporting on five subjects: Brazil’s preparations for the World Cup and the Olympics; cases of torture and violence perpetrated by state agents; large investments in the Amazon region; violations of human rights; and urban issues. Working on these topics, *Pública* won a dozen awards of journalism in Brazil in the last three years. In 2013, it was a finalist of Esso, the main award in the country that resembles the Pulitzer Prize and is given out by the Exxon Mobil oil company.

The main goal of *Pública* is not to be a media vehicle or a news website, but to supply high-quality investigative stories for Brazilian and Latin America outlets. Because of that, it does not consider the number of users on the website a

## **INNOVATIONS – Agência Pública**

- High quality investigative journalism provided free for republication under creative commons license.
- Story ideas pitched to donors for funding, produced independently

relevant statistic. All pieces from its website (<http://apublica.org>) can be published for free by websites and print outlets, using the Creative Commons license. Around 60 outlets publish *Pública*'s pieces, including nationwide websites in Brazil (such as UOL, Terra, and iG), Yahoo, regional newspapers and new media initiatives.

The agency has international partnerships and translates pieces from international organizations, such as Symbolia and ICIJ. Most of the stories are produced by a team of 10 people the Sao Paulo office: two directors, three reporters, one assistant editor, one video reporter, and three administrative assistants. The agency also has an advisory board, composed of eight experienced journalists who provide pro bono support to the team.

According to Viana, the idea of creating a non-profit news agency came in November 2010, when she was working on releasing documents obtained by *Wikileaks* that had come from the State Department and discussed Brazil. At that time, Viana, Amaral and Merlino were mulling a project inspired by initiatives in the US, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting and ProPublica. "We were not sure about the model we should adopt, but as I had the *Wikileaks* documents in my hands, I thought it was a good opportunity to start," Viana said.

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**"Investigative journalism is never profitable, this has never been our goal."**

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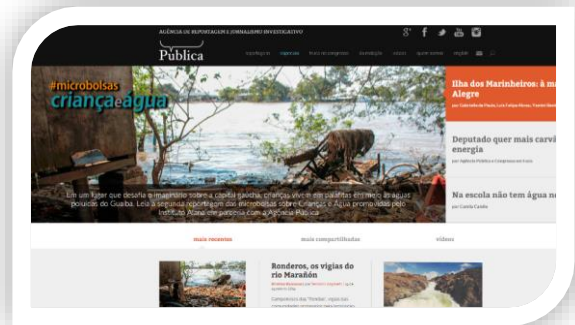
- *Natalia Viana, Co-founder*

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The three journalists created *Pública*'s website on *Wordpress* in March, using their own savings and without having a financial plan in mind. The first pieces, investigated and written by the founders, were about the repression of Araguaia guerrilla movement, an armed group that battled the military dictatorship in Brazil in the 1970s. Funding started to flow eight months later, when *Pública* partnered with the Ford Foundation.

Today, international donors are a big part of the revenue stream. Ford Foundation gives a fixed amount, through their Media Rights and Access Program, which covers the operational costs of the newsroom. Open Society Foundations and Omidyar Network fund stories and specific projects. There are also donors for specific topics. One example was the series "Amazonia Pública" (Public Amazon),

which was funded by the Climate and Land Use Alliance, a US organization that provides grants related to climate change. According to Viana, the donors do not get involved in editorial decisions. “We pitch the initial idea of our projects to the funding companies. They do not know about our investigation or the focus we will choose for a story,” she said. *Pública* has received grants from OSF since 2012.



Other significant financial support comes from the readers. The agency recently ran a crowdfunding campaign to fund ten investigative projects in 2015. Every month, contributors will choose the topic of the story from three options. The campaign has raised R\$70,000 (around US\$23,000) – 40% more than initially expected. The founders do not plan to change the business model in order to make profit. “Investigative journalism is never profitable, this has never been our goal,” Viana says. Moreover, *Pública* does not have an exit strategy. “No one starts a business thinking about its end,” Viana argues.

The directors say *Agência Pública* will remain necessary because it fills a gap left by the national outlets, which are investing less in investigative stories because of financial pressures on traditional journalism. So far the agency has not succeeded in convincing national newspapers and magazines to publish *Pública* stories. Instead, Viana hopes to expand *Pública*’s syndication network and have pieces picked up by print media, TV and radio, as well as producing more content in video, especially short documentaries. *Pública* also aims to extend its reach abroad, producing and translating pieces to Spanish and English.

## ***Jota – Brazil (99th)***

*Interview by Carolina Araujo*



***Jota is a specialized website that covers the Brazilian judiciary that was launched in September 2014 to promote governance and accountability. It is financed through angel investors, subscriptions and a paywall.***

### **SNAPSHOT - *Jota***

- *Break-even: 3-5 years*
- *50,000 users, 700 subscribers*
- *20% choose annual subscription package*

*Jota* is a start-up that covers the Brazilian judiciary system. It was launched in September 2014 by five journalists who covered this field for the Brazilian legacy media: Felipe Seligman (former reporter at *Folha de S.Paulo*, the largest Brazilian newspaper), Felipe Recondo (who worked at *O Estado de S. Paulo*, also a nationwide daily), Laura Diniz (*Veja*, the largest Brazilian magazine), Barbara Pombo (*Valor Econômico*, the most prestigious economic newspaper) and Iuri Dantas (*Bloomberg*). They left their jobs in 2013 and have worked for a whole year to build the website [www.jota.info](http://www.jota.info).

According to Mr. Seligman, CEO of *Jota*, the idea came as a response to a “practical problem.” Covering judiciary issues for *Folha de S.Paulo*, he realized that this topic was gaining importance in the Brazilian political agenda; however, due to the crisis of advertising in the newspapers, the newspapers were printing fewer pages and, as a consequence, many stories did not get published.

In Brazil, information about laws is released all the time and it can be difficult to keep up to date with new regulations. *Jota’s* goal is to provide reliable and timely information about the legal system in the hope that this will increase accountability and strengthen democracy in the country. This is especially

### **INNOVATIONS – *Jota***

- Identified and targeted niche - judicial information in Brazil
- Focus on converting users into subscribers
- Freelance network to complement work of paid staff, ensuring flexibility and that entire news agenda is properly covered

important in Brazil because of the politicization of the judiciary system. (It is common for courts to release different decisions on the same matter according to their political alliances and interests, especially in the countryside.) Another mission is to improve the business environment. Brazil is a hostile place to create business because of its heavy bureaucracy and excess of regulations. The country ranks 120 in the World Bank's *Doing Business* report, which measures the ease of doing business in 189 countries worldwide.

The idea of developing a website about legal topics is not new in Brazil. Founded in 2007, *Consultor Juridico* is the most famous website in this area. The two sites have different approaches though. *Consultor Juridico* was created as an electronic magazine, and it mainly provides an information service, by releasing juridical decisions in journalistic style. *Jota*, by contrast, publishes analysis and insider information about the Brazilian courts, as well as providing specialized news to companies and law firms.

Having a homogeneous team of founders, all of them journalists, has benefits and shortcomings, according to Seligman. The advantage is the consensus among the partners about the value of journalism and credibility, as well as their deep experience. The drawback is the lack of knowledge about business. "The problem is that, in Brazil, journalists are not prepared to run their own publications. Now, I am learning about accounting with an accountant, legal issues with a lawyer. We had never had this type of knowledge before."

*Jota* developed a paywall as soon as it was founded. Each user can read up to five pieces a month for free. After that, users must subscribe for either R\$20 per month (around US\$6.70) or R\$200 per year (around US\$67). After nine months, *Jota* reported 50,000 individual users and 700 subscribers, with an average of 90 new subscribers per month. Around 20% of subscribers choose the annual package. The goal is to have 1,500 subscribers by the end of the first year and 10,000 in five years—a goal that Seligman recognizes as ambitious. The main strategy is to attract corporate subscribers, especially law firms interested in reliable information about new laws and regulations in Brazil.

*Jota's* strong initial audience allowed it to hire a paid team of reporters and interns. Now, *Jota* has two reporters and two interns in Brasilia and two reporters and one intern in Sao Paulo. The five partners are also part of the newsroom and

write pieces frequently. Moreover, the website has a team of 15 freelancers around the world who cover events such as conferences in foreign universities and official visits by Brazilian judiciary authorities.

According to Seligman, the most difficult aspect of running a start-up is funding: “In Brazil there is no culture of entrepreneurship. It is difficult to learn about start-ups, best practices, and this is even more difficult in journalism. Even in the US this culture is more related to technology than content and information.”

The seed money for the launch of *Jota* was raised by two main sources: founders’ own reserves and financial assistance of close people. “Our formula was the FFF—family, friends and fools,” Seligman said. *Jota* currently has two investors who cover some of its operating costs. “We are very lucky to have these people,” Seligman said. “They give us security because we still do not have financial autonomy. They do not join meetings, nor do they influence our editorial decisions. They only help us because they are very close to us.”

Seligman wants *Jota* to break even within three to five years. For that to happen, *Jota* needs to increase the number of subscribers, especially corporate subscribers (law firms). It also needs to keep a lid on its personnel costs. Today, *Jota* frequently uses its network of freelancers since the paid team is not able to cover all the daily news.

Meanwhile, *Jota* is expanding its revenue sources. As well as promoting subscriptions, the partners are creating a sales department to sell content on demand. Recently, *Jota* covered, on demand, a conference about legal infrastructure in Brasilia and received R\$30,000 (around US\$10,000) after producing a publication about the event. “This was an exception and gave us a good amount of money, but we have to be careful to not lose our focus. Our focus is the website,” Seligman said. Donors are not part of the “revenue stream” today, but he hopes that they will fund investigations on particular topics, such as freedom of expression. “We don’t see donors as a way to sustain our business, but as supporters of specific projects. Our belief is that we will not earn money with donors,” Seligman argued.

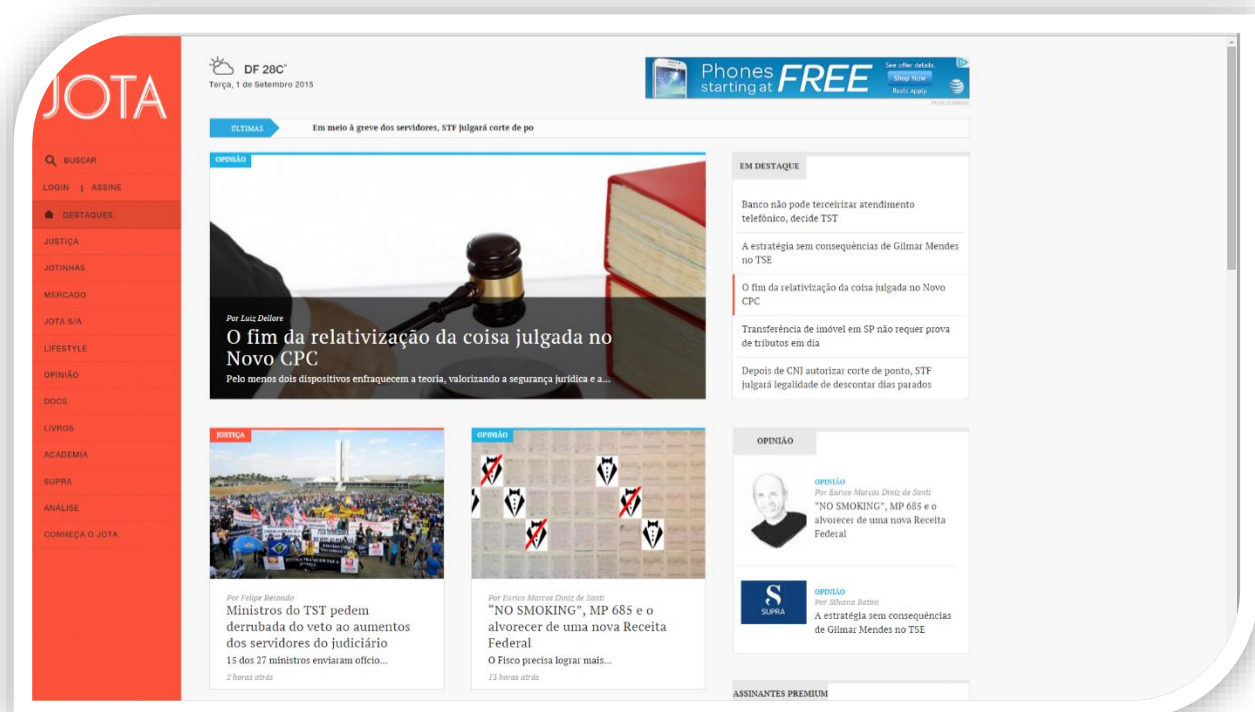
After nine months of operation, the founders believe that the decision to focus on a specific audience was the right one to make. “For us, niche is the right choice for



people who want to invest in journalism in Brazil. It is much easier to sell content for a specific public that is more willing to pay for information of high quality about a topic that really interests them,” Seligman said.

Nevertheless, some shifts in the initial plan were necessary. “In the beginning, we had the wrong idea that high audience was not necessary, that our focus should be accumulating subscribers, not ordinary readers. We realized that only the frequent reader would be a future subscriber. Therefore, we must worry about high audience and hard news as well.”

For the partners, *Jota* is a lifelong project and was created to be profitable. As such, no exit strategy has been planned. “Our goal is to be a primary source of information about judiciary issues for law firms. We want to be an agency like Bloomberg for law issues in Brazil and Latin America.” Seligman said that, so far, the financial plan has been successful, even with the current economic crisis in Brazil, because *Jota* does not depend on any one type of revenue, such as sponsorships or advertising: “we believe that the demand for high quality judiciary information is a long-term tendency and will enable us to develop our business.”



# AFRICAN SKYCAM – Kenya (100<sup>th</sup>)

*Interviewed by Kristen Grennan*



**African skyCAM was initially started as a project of *The Star*, a newspaper in Kenya that wanted to begin using drones for journalism practices. When a number of African countries, including Kenya, banned public drone use, African skyCam switched its focus to advocacy: promoting drone use for journalism.**

African skyCAM is looking to expand the use of drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles, for journalistic purposes in Africa. The Kenya-based project was the brainchild of Dickens Olewe, who was working for *The Star* news outlet. African skyCAM was funded in 2012 after winning the African News Innovation Challenge and first started operations in 2013. However, in 2014, while African skyCAM was training journalists on how to use drones, the Kenyan government banned drone use, citing security concerns.<sup>82</sup> (Other countries to adopt such bans included Tanzania, Uganda, and Morocco.) Since then, the organization has been advocating for the use of drones for journalistic purposes in Africa.

## **SNAPSHOT – African skyCAM**

- Drone cost: \$2,500
- Supplementary technologies (iPad, SLR camera): \$2,500

Olewe argues that drone restrictions stifle innovation. Through them, “African countries not only exclude themselves from a rapidly growing industry; they also miss out on opportunities to harness the technology for social good,” he says.<sup>83</sup>

## **INNOVATIONS – African skyCAM**

- Drone allows unique perspective on protests, natural disasters
- Unique footage can be highly shareable and when produced into a video package
- Drones can be used to circumvent uncooperative authorities, for instance to gain access to a disaster zone
- The cost of adopting drones into newsrooms is quite low. A drone and its supporting technology costs \$5,000—cheaper than hiring a helicopter

<sup>82</sup> For more information, see: Kariuki, James. May 30, 2014. “Government Bans Drone Use to Fight Poaching in Ol Pejeta.” *Daily Nation*. <http://mobile.nation.co.ke/news/Government-bans-use-of-drone-to-fight-poaching-in-Ol-Pejeta/-/1950946/2332004/-/format/xhtml/-/1wdq78/-/index.html>. Accessed: 8/13/2015.

<sup>83</sup> Olewe, Dickens. July 14, 2015. “Ban on Civilians’ Use of Drones Kills Innovation.” *African skyCAM*. <http://www.africanskycam.com/ban-on-civilians-use-of-drones-kills-innovation/>. Accessed: 7/28/2015.

While South Africa has, as of July 2015, allowed drone operators to obtain permits to use drones,<sup>84</sup> the methods to obtain the trainings may already be outdated. According to Olewe, drones are becoming fully automated: “With a smartphone, you can map out a GPS route. The joystick model is almost outdated already.” As a result, the need for technical training is diminishing; as the technology changes, any trainings using old techniques become obsolete while there is a growing need for an understanding of the laws and equipment.

A major benefit of using drones is that it can cut costs for newsrooms. The cost of a drone is approximately \$2,500, plus another \$2,500 for supplementary technologies, such as an iPad and an SLR camera. A news outlet can reduce expenses further, “if [its] main focus is in aerial images,” Olewe says. (African skyCAM’s initial costs were covered by grant funding through the 2012 African News Innovation Challenge.<sup>85</sup>) By investing in drones, newsrooms spend less on transportation, particularly costly helicopters, in high-risk situations. For example, when covering a flood, an outlet must often incur the cost of a boat to take the crew to the scene and work with authorities to get journalists on helicopters for aerial shots (which is not only costly, but can hurt editorial independence). With drones, the costs are reduced and editorial independence preserved.

Interestingly, Olewe does not advise independent drone operators to take up the business of reporting news. Rather, news outlets should incorporate drones into their reporting and embed a drone team within the newsroom—a more sustainable option, in his view.

Apart from covering natural disasters, drones can be useful in recording political rallies, sporting events, and agricultural and conservation issues. For example, Olewe teamed up with Ben Kreimer (a beta fellow for *BuzzFeed*’s Open Lab Fellowship and adviser to the Drone Journalism Lab at the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln) to create a 3D map of the Dandora Dump in Nairobi—a story that has previously been covered by the BBC and *The Guardian*. The 3D map has points of interest, such as housing areas within the dump and two schools located on its edge. In a recent interview,

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<sup>84</sup> Wakefield, Adam. May 17, 2015. “New Regulations for Drones in SA.”

<http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/New-regulations-for-drones-in-SA-20150517>. Accessed: 8/14/2015.

<sup>85</sup> For more information and the list of 2012 winners, see here: <http://africannewschallenge.org/2012-winners/>. Accessed: 8/14/2015.

Olewe explained, "When it comes to drone journalism I always talk about all old stories, new perspectives... This story has been told all the time, but people have just never brought this kind of shot of 'OK, what are we actually talking about? What are the challenges that these people face?'"<sup>86</sup>

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**"With a smartphone, you can map out a GPS route. The joystick model is almost outdated already."**

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- *Dickens Olewe, Founder*

Because of the recent bans on drones, African skyCAM has had to adjust its goals to advocating for fewer restrictions across the region. While he was a John S. Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University, Olewe organized a conference on drone use in reporting last April, in partnership with The Center for Investigative Reporting and the News Lab at Google.<sup>87</sup>

As its next step, African skyCAM is seeking funding to work in Senegal, which has a growing tech industry and has not banned drones, and to collaborate with journalists and news outlets there to demonstrate the opportunities of drone use. These steps, Olewe hopes, could turn the tide in other African countries where drones are banned for journalists.

Despite the current difficulties, Olewe remains optimistic about African skyCAM's achievements so far, stating, "I am happy with what we have been able to do." Olewe is looking at partnership opportunities with organizations who could benefit from drone technology. For example, a humanitarian organization may be in need of aerial footage of refugee camps in order to assess the camp's needs and issues. Olewe hopes that, in the near future, drones will also be available for journalistic use in crowd-counting, virtual reality, and live-casting of events.

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<sup>86</sup> Edge, Abigail. June 8, 2015. "'Old stories, new perspectives': Drone journalism in Africa." *Journalism*. <https://www.journalism.co.uk/news/old-stories-new-perspectives-drone-journalism-in-africa/s2/a565390/>. Accessed: 7/28/2015.

<sup>87</sup> Garcia, Dawn. May 5, 2015. "Elevating the News with Drones." *John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships at Stanford*. <http://jsk.stanford.edu/news-notes/2015/elevating-the-news-with-drones/>. Accessed: 8/14/2015.

## ***iHUB – Kenya (100<sup>th</sup>)***

*Interview by Jacqueline Stapleton*



Kenya has been rising as an IT and tech center. The revolutionary mobile phone–based money transfer and microfinancing service called mPesa was founded there in 2007. During the post-election violence of 2008, Erik Hersmann and a few of his fellow techies founded Ushahidi, a non-profit which pioneered the use of text-messaging for crowd-sourcing and real-time information mapping.

For several years, the Kenyan tech community has been gathering at an annual conference, Barcamp. In 2008, members asked themselves why they only met at conferences; couldn't there be a permanent meeting space for the tech community? Hersmann then started meeting with various potential corporate sponsors working in Kenya, to see if he could interest them in funding this idea, but found no interested parties by 2009. However, by that year, Ushahidi was growing rapidly and attracting good funding, including \$1.5 million from the Omidyar Network. Hersmann and his Ushahidi colleagues decided to use \$200,000 of that money to get their iHub idea off the ground

### **SNAPSHOT – *iHub***

- Established with \$200,000 from Omidyar-supported Kenyan NGO Ushahidi
- Mailing list: 16,000
- 80% supported by earned revenue

Hersmann noted that this was great for the nascent organization, “because we had enough money, it gave us the two years to figure out what we were doing. We didn't have to worry about revenue right away. Nobody believed in this model yet, nobody really knew what this could be. So we didn't have to ask them for money.” But by March 2010, when iHub launched, “people from the community were coming to help in getting it set up, getting equipment and chairs, designing the website. ... The community was happening already.”

### **INNOVATIONS – *iHub***

- Communal meeting space, with a 'tiered' membership system'
- Publicized new project using existing list-serv
- Monetizes through training and research arm, making in-demand skills available to those outside organization

There was already a robust list-serve for the tech community called skunkworks, and the group used it to publicize iHub's opening. "We really didn't know who was going to show up. We thought there might be a few hundred people who would use the space. But very quickly there was too much demand for the space, which forced us to create a tiered membership system. Black members were basically staff, they had keys. Red members have their own reserved seat, and a locker. Green members can use it every day, and the white members basically are on a now large (16,000 +) mailing list, and use it occasionally."

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**"Because we had enough money, it gave us the two years to figure out what we were doing. We didn't have to worry about revenue right away."**

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- Erik Hersmann, Founder

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Erik recalled a meeting with Google in Kenya, shortly after the opening. "Google is all about metrics, and during our first meeting, they asked us: how are you going to measure success? I said, 'well, we just believe good things will happen,' and there were these little smiles around the table. I said, 'listen, we don't know how to measure it yet, we don't know what it's going to be yet; it's an experiment. Just join us, let's figure it out together,' And they signed on. And from that, we eventually brought on more corporate partners, so that eventually when we needed money, they were there."

But iHub wanted to find a way to generate revenue; the space was a cost, but it wasn't bringing in any money. So the group created some revenue arms, the largest of which is called iHubResearch, accounting for over 50% of iHub's revenue. Comprised primarily of consultants from the Kenyan tech community, the Research arm offers consultancy services and trainings on the innovative use of data, hardware technologies in research and problem solving, and user experience and market research. Another initiative is the iHubUXlab, which provides design and user experience thinking to product development.

Today, some 80% of iHub's costs are covered by initiatives of this sort. It has 30 permanent staff, and a large revolving pool of consultants. The fixed costs are the staff and the office space. The organization has been approached numerous times to expand into other parts of Kenya, as well as Africa, to create a franchise. But iHub isn't prioritizing this objective. "I don't know if the value of the iHub moniker

is enough to be able to earn money,” Hersmann noted. If we spend a lot of energy managing a franchise system, is that good for the iHub community?”

As a result of the synergy and serendipity of having a constant space to meet, attend lectures and trainings together, the iHub community has spawned a number of successful start-ups. One is Kopo Kopo, launched by two members of iHub. The founders took the idea of mPesa, which allows individuals to transfer money to each other, and created a way for companies to receive payment via mPesa. The start-up is now expanding to several other countries in Africa and Asia.

Another initiative is m-Farm Kenya, an SMS-based tool for farmers that enables them to receive up-to-date market pricing for their goods, links them to buyers, and helps them acquire their agricultural products directly from manufacturers. These are just two of the 152 companies listed on the iHub website, offering an extremely wide range of tech solutions.

In terms of expansion, iHub doesn’t really want to go beyond being completely self-sustaining. They are coming up with some more potential revenue streams, and hope to be self-supporting within a few years. As Erik notes, “the iHub of today might look completely different five years from now—or be gone. What’s most important to us is that we fulfill our mission to bring the tech community together.”



# ***HIMAL SOUTHASIAN* – Nepal (105<sup>th</sup>)**

*Interview by JJ Robinson*



***Himal Southasian* is a quarterly magazine based in Nepal covering the South Asia region, published and distributed in a book format. It has been published in various forms since 1987, funded substantially by donors including the Norwegian embassy, and is currently expanding its outreach to develop a more commercially sustainable model**

## **SNAPSHOT – *Himal Southasian***

- 15,000 subscribers
- Years in operation: 27
- Number of staff: 10
- Monthly cost: \$20,000

A quarter of a century is a long time for any publication to survive, let alone an independent print magazine covering one of the world's poorest and most politically fractious regions. In an industry where incomes are modest and donors fickle, *Himal Southasian* deserves attention for its endurance as well as the quality of its reporting.

Founded in 1987 and based in Nepal, *Himal* has experimented with many business models, eventually settling on a non-profit trust. It focuses on long-form journalism, providing in-depth coverage of issues and stories in a greatly uncovered region. *Himal* has never been a light read; it publishes long pieces on subjects like the delicate political game of Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, three women's struggle for justice against sexual violence in militarized Kashmir, and the ramifications of an attack on Kabul's Taverna du Liban, a popular restaurant known for serving liquor discreetly in teapots.

## **INNOVATIONS – *Himal Southasian***

- In-kind advertising and subscription package arrangements with other high-quality media outlets with a similar readership
- Syndication packages for foreign-language media in other markets
- Institutional subscriptions for universities as a consistent income: relevant for department-specific (i.e. South Asia) long-form or scholarly content
- High percent commission rates to lure third-party advertising agents
- Proposes a services platform for independent media providing subsidized access to needed skills, such as web and payment portal design, helpdesk and social media marketing. Willing to pay.



Articles tend to be scholarly, written by academics as well as journalists, covering a region as diverse in culture as geography, encompassing Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, the Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and the autonomous region of Tibet.

The subscriber base is around 15,000, much on it international. “We’re a staple in university South Asia departments around the world,” says Editor Aunohita Mojumdar.

Perhaps counterintuitively, *Himal*’s broad focus limits the publication’s appeal in many of the countries it covers, the media of which tend to be nationalistic and inward looking, says Mojumdar. Demand for regional coverage is low in South Asia, which undercuts *Himal*’s ability to sustain itself commercially in its home environment.

Mojumdar, an Indian journalist with extensive experience in Afghanistan, arrived at *Himal* in 2012 when the magazine was in the midst of a financial crisis. *Himal* had ceased publishing as a monthly print edition and its major donor, the Norwegian embassy, had expressed reluctance to continue supporting it.

Emergency funding from the Open Society Foundation provided a stay of execution, while the Norwegians were persuaded to commit a further 3,892,000 KNR (approximately \$500,000) in funding until 2016. Mojumdar switched the publication to a quarterly book format, allowing it to be sold in bookshops around the region and avoiding the distribution delays that had seen it struggle on South Asian news stands. She also began paying attention to administration, marketing and outreach; as with many struggling independent publications, *Himal*’s overwhelming focus on editorial and content had led it to neglect more mundane concerns necessary for survival.

It was *Himal*’s donors who initially pushed it towards becoming more sustainable, says Mojumdar. This trend truly gathered steam in 2012. *Himal* began collecting money it was owed, strengthening its administration and putting effort into outreach and marketing while trying to maintain its commitment to editorial. *Himal* is now earning revenue of 30 to 40 percent of the roughly \$20,000 it spends a month on salaries and production, most of it through subscriptions.

“We haven’t considered advertising as a big revenue component because it’s just so difficult,” Mojumdar says. “We offer 50 percent commission to advertising agents but there is a knee-jerk reaction when they decide we are not market friendly because we are noncommercial.”

A prime advertising market, especially for job adverts, would seem to be the many UN and NGO organizations with their regional headquarters in Kathmandu. Surely, supporting independent media by giving it business would be less bureaucratic than donating. But Mojumdar says that reaching the point of getting paid ads from these organizations remains “a long and convoluted process. We don’t have the resources to go through that.”

Instead, *Himal* has entered cooperative arrangements with other publications in the region, including India’s *Caravan* magazine, offering joint subscription packages and exchanging advertising. Such in-kind deals have greatly lowered *Himal*’s own expenditure on outreach and marketing, says Mojumdar.

She is also leveraging *Himal*’s existing recognition in universities, targeting institutional subscriptions which tend to reliably renew year on year. *Himal* is also developing syndication packages for overseas media keen to boost their South Asia coverage, particularly the foreign language press. At the moment it generously allows anyone to reprint its articles.

An Open Society-sponsored trip in 2013 to visit the *Texas Tribune* and study its successful not-for-profit membership model (in lieu of donations) inspired Mojumdar to try a similar project. This proved especially useful in the Nepalese context, where the government requires every foreign donation to receive individual permission, regardless of size. A ‘subscription-plus’ model circumvented this regulatory obstacle. The feature is new—as of July 2015, just one person had signed up—and outreach efforts have been hampered as *Himal* catches up after publication delays caused by the two earthquakes in Nepal.

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**“Knowing how to use social media is very different to knowing how to do social media marketing. I need maybe 10-25 percent of a full-time person for jobs like this, but finding the right person is very hard.”**

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- Aunohita Mojumdar, Editor

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The challenge for many outlets like *Himal* is that the kind of skills needed to successfully commercialize and market a news organization are typically unfamiliar to the journalists running them. Many staff are instead inclined to redouble editorial efforts until they burn out or go bankrupt.

“I am discovering that knowing how to use social media is very different to knowing how to do social media marketing,” says Mojumdar. “I need maybe 10 to 25 percent of a full-time person for jobs like this, but finding the right person is very hard.”

What would help *Himal* “and at least 10 other organizations like us” is a platform supported by a third party that would offer small media outlets not just tips, but the services of skilled professionals. “We need help with small components, like a pay portal to make it easy for people to make monetary transactions in countries such as ours, or online marketing. This kind of service could be based anywhere in the world—Wisconsin, even. I’d be willing to pay for it,” Mojumdar says.

She also believes that donors need to be realistic when demanding that independent media outlets become sustainable in places where their existence “goes against market logic.” Publications like *Himal* can become victims of their longevity as donors look for the latest trend, feeling that they have “done enough already.”

“A lot of media development organizations are interested in supporting something new, and they spend huge amounts of money in South Asia on conferences, papers and think tanks conceptualizing how to bring people together. *Himal* has been bringing out a quantifiable product month after month for almost 28 years,” she says, citing post-war Afghanistan as a cautionary example.

“There was a huge amount of media support in 2003-2006 as part of the democracy building project. Lots of outlets appeared. But then donors said, ‘we have paid for you long enough, now you must survive in the market.’ What market? There was no advertising. They built up the media, then basically told it to go die.”

# THE WILL – Nigeria (111<sup>th</sup>)



Interview by Kristen Grennan

***The Will*** is a Nigerian online news site aimed at providing unbiased news to Nigerians at home and around the globe. In order to preserve its independence, ***The Will*** is based in the US, as is the well-known Nigerian news outlet ***Sahara Reporters***. Social media and web messaging platforms play an important role in keeping the news outlet connected with this readers.

*The Will* is an independent online news outlet focused on Nigerian news and politics. *The Will* was founded in 2009 by Austyn Ogannah during a period of political upheaval after then-President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua fell ill while in office (he ultimately died in May 2010).

## SNAPSHOT – *The Will*

- Overhead costs: \$30,000 per month
- Funding: 60% advertising, 40% covered by owner
- Social media reach: 73,000

During this time, two political factions vied for authority and, according to Ogannah, both “tried to use the media and use their influence over the media to propagate their message.” In this highly contentious and political climate, a number of online news sites were founded in 2009-2010, which, in addition to *The Will*, included *Sahara Reporters*, *Huhu Online*, and *The Times of Nigeria*.

*The Will* focuses on breaking news and opinion, with additional coverage on business, politics, world, and sports news. It claims to be one of the mediums to break the news of Yar'Adua's death.<sup>88</sup> In May 2011, *The Will* also claims to have “exclusively reported the arrest and detention by Interpol in Dubai, UAE, of a key and very influential player in the Nigerian power struggle, Chief James Ibori, a

## INNOVATIONS – *The Will*

- Publisher based in the US to preserve independence and increase resiliency
- High mobile penetration relative to internet access led to effective broadcasting over Blackberry Messenger service
- Started in the wake of a political event: the illness and 2010 death of President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua

<sup>88</sup> “About Us.” *The Will*. <http://thewillnigeria.com/news/about-us/>. Accessed: 7/31/2015.

former governor of oil-rich Delta State, who had evaded Nigeria's security agencies and fled after a warrant was issued for his arrest in Nigeria and Britain over charges of money laundering."<sup>89</sup>

Ogannah points out that, when *The Will* was founded in 2009, despite limited, expensive, and slow Internet connectivity, Nigerians were still willing to turn to online news sources to access truthful political news. *The Will* connected with its followers through the Blackberry Messenger service popular at the time. Because texting wasn't free and internet access was limited, Blackberry Messenger provided the most effective communication channel, Ogannah says. Social media still plays a huge role in Nigeria's online community. Today, Facebook is the third most visited website in Nigeria (after Google.com and Google.ng)<sup>90</sup> and has approximately 11.2 million users.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, while overall internet penetration rate is only about 42%,<sup>92</sup> mobile penetration is 65%.<sup>93</sup> According to Ogannah, "social media has helped us grow our readership and connect to the average reader as well. Without these social media channels our readership wouldn't be what it is today."

As do many online news sites in the developing world, the Nigerian diaspora uses social media and online news as a way to keep informed. Ogannah estimates that approximately 80% of his readership is Nigerian, with approximately half residing within the country and the other half being diaspora members.

*The Will* currently has five in-house journalists and syndicates with 12-15 journalists, as well as subscribes to the News Agency of Nigeria. Journalism is a dangerous profession in Nigeria and journalists often face retaliation and violence. In 2009, Reporters Without Borders ranked the country 135 (out of 175)<sup>94</sup> and today it stands at 111 (out of 180).<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> From Alexa.com: <http://www.alexacom/topsites/countries/NG>. Accessed 7/31/15.

<sup>91</sup> Reid, Skyler. March 19, 2015. "Nigerians Look to Social Media Amid Information Scarcity Ahead of Elections." *Aljazeera America*. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/19/social-media-plays-key-role-in-nigerian-elections.html>. Accessed 7/31/15.

<sup>92</sup> World Bank Data on Internet Users: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>. Accessed: 7/31/15.

<sup>93</sup> Reid, Skyler. March 19, 2015. "Nigerians Look to Social Media Amid Information Scarcity Ahead of Elections." *Aljazeera America*. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/19/social-media-plays-key-role-in-nigerian-elections.html>. Accessed 7/31/15.

<sup>94</sup> Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, 2009. <https://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2009,1001.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index, 2015, Nigeria. <https://index.rsf.org/#!/index-details/NGA>.

As a result, although all of *The Will's* reporters are based in Nigeria, Obannah manages the publication from San Francisco (similarly, Omoyele Sowore edits *Sahara Reporters* from New York). “Journalists have been assassinated, some have been assaulted, some have been barred from covering particular beats because the content had been negative, [and some have experienced] all sorts of intimidation and harassment. ... Journalists still live in fear, I still live in fear,” commented Ogannah. “Because we are here [in San Francisco] we are freer to express ourselves. But at home we have to be careful. People have been killed for publishing what is right. I have had phone calls, people threatening my staff.”

Additional struggles faced by Nigerian journalists include low pay and poor IT infrastructure, such as consistent electricity and internet connectivity.

About 60% of *The Will's* revenues are derived from advertising, and the rest covered by the owner and founder. According to Ogannah, “Like every other news media, I see financial success [as being] when we generate more revenue to cover our overhead and still have surplus. When we have more multiple, direct advertisers—that is the key. ... But we’re not there yet. ... I know that we’re on track and that we’ll get there soon” The organization is also looking for partners to invest in the business.

Commenting on how the organization has changed since inception, Ogannah noted, “when we started, we said we wanted to build a media that will be bold, that will be fair, that will be unbiased, hold people accountable for the power they have and how they use it. We’ve also expanded it to hold [accountable] those that are outside of government, [who] own businesses and have used their businesses negatively.” Looking at the future, Ogannah pointed out, “I am here for the long run. I want to build [*The Will*], build it with partners as well. Until that is done, I have no exit strategy.”

## MINIVAN NEWS – Maldives (112nd)



*Interview by JJ Robinson*

***Minivan News*** (meaning ‘independent’ in Dhivehi) was the first credible, English-language news service in the Maldives, an archipelago nation of 350,000 people in the Indian Ocean 800 miles southwest of Sri Lanka. The publication recently rebranded as the ***Maldives Independent***.

A world-famous tropical honeymoon destination, the Maldives is less well known for its boiling local politics and rising Islamic fundamentalism. Ruled by an isolationist dictatorship for 30 years, the Maldives drew little international attention beyond gasps over the beauty—and prices—of its resort islands.

That changed in 2008 with the surprise election victory of a former Amnesty prisoner of conscience, Mohamed Nasheed. Capitalizing on Nasheed’s magnanimity in victory, remnants of the regime inflamed Islamic nationalism and seized control of the police and military, forcing his resignation in 2012 and toppling the new democracy. Fresh polls in 2013 saw the election of the former dictator’s half brother, Abdulla Yameen.

### SNAPSHOT – *Minivan News*

- Monthly budget: \$5,000
- Desired monthly budget: \$9,700
- Number of staff: 5
- Age: 9 years

During the dictatorship, media was state-run and tightly controlled, and outspoken critics and journalists routinely jailed. *Minivan News*—the name means “independent” in the local language, Dhivehi—was founded in 2006 by the exiled opposition in neighboring Sri Lanka. Despite its political origins, the site hired

### INNOVATIONS – *Minivan News* (now *Maldives Independent*)

- Affiliation with foreign media and journalist support organizations increases the political cost of belligerent government action
- Relentlessly emphasizes independence and credibility of content, and allow it to speak for itself
- Outsources advertising to a third-party marketing firm, allowing journalists to focus on editorial
- Successful foreign internship program

foreign editors and became the first outlet to report credibly on corruption and human rights scandals in the lead-up to the 2008 vote.

*Minivan's* political support ceased following the election, as the former opposition grappled with the demands of governing. Rescued by its foreign editors, the site was registered as a business and managed to survive on advertising and whatever donations it could scrounge. It continued to report on social issues and hold the new government accountable to promised reforms. The dictatorship's state media was privatized under the control of several regime-affiliated resort oligarchs, allowing *Minivan* to become the primary and uncontested source of independent analysis on the Maldives for the international community.

The publication survived the 2012 coup by protectively affiliating itself with ThomsonReuters and Reporters Without Borders, increasing the political cost to the government of any attempt to shut it down, and proceeded to openly report the regime's efforts to legitimize itself. Along the way, *Minivan* exposed grand corruption in the judiciary, uncovered a \$123-million human trafficking network, and reported on endemic human rights abuses such as child prostitution and the routine flogging of women for the crime of extramarital sex.

As the regime consolidated power, it became braver, jailing the former president and deploying riot police and violent gangs to crack down on dissent. One of *Minivan's* journalists was kidnapped at knifepoint in August 2014 and is still missing, while others have been threatened in the street and received death threats. A machete lodged in the door prompted a move of office. "The media is now the only place left in the country where there is still dissent," says Editor Zaheena Rasheed. "Everyone feels the threat of the government, even the tourism oligarchs."

The greatest challenge of the government's growing authoritarianism has been the reluctance of sources to speak on the record, says Rasheed. "People used to have an opinion and something to say. Now people don't speak and nobody wants to comment on anything," she says. "How do you run a media outlet and create conversation when nobody is talking? None of the NGOs talk—even Transparency Maldives. The independent commissions are silent, the auditor general has been thrown out, Supreme Court judges have been sacked, the



Human Rights Commission has been accused of undermining national sovereignty and is being overhauled. Everyone is really afraid.”

Rasheed is wary of relying too much on the Maldives’ loud (and anonymous) Twitter scene for her reporting, as she says it does not reflect general public opinion and is increasingly being used “by government goons trying to turn the conversation”.

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**“The media is now the only place left in country where there is still dissent.”**

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- *Zaheena Rasheed, Editor*

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Instead, Rasheed and her team of four seek out people on the street, “though not as much as we should, because we’re short-staffed. People will comment anonymously; we write ‘a teacher,’ or ‘a mother of three,’” she explains. A small consolation of the oppressive political climate has been an increase in the number of state officials willing to leak documents, she notes.

A hacker broke into the *Minivan* site’s CMS in July 2015, and somehow crippled its SEO rankings. With a tight budget of just \$5,000 a month and little access to technological expertise, there was little *Minivan* could do other than rush existing plans to rebrand as the *Maldives Independent* under a new domain. The new name, besides being less confusing for a foreign audience, is an attempt to resolve a common local misperception that *Minivan* is still affiliated with the jailed president’s political party due to its origins.

“Some of our readers are upset at the change. They liked *Minivan* and what it stood for, but it’s been damaging,” says Rasheed. “We’re proud of our history. Nothing has changed editorially and we outright declare our affiliation with *Minivan* on the site, but now it’s a lot easier to talk to a government person who doesn’t read the news and will hang up the moment we say ‘*Minivan*’.”

The neutral rebranding opens new advertising opportunities among companies wary of associating themselves with *Minivan*’s perceived antigovernment bias, although Rasheed says that a more prosaic challenge has been companies threatening to pull out unless *Minivan* covered their every press conference.

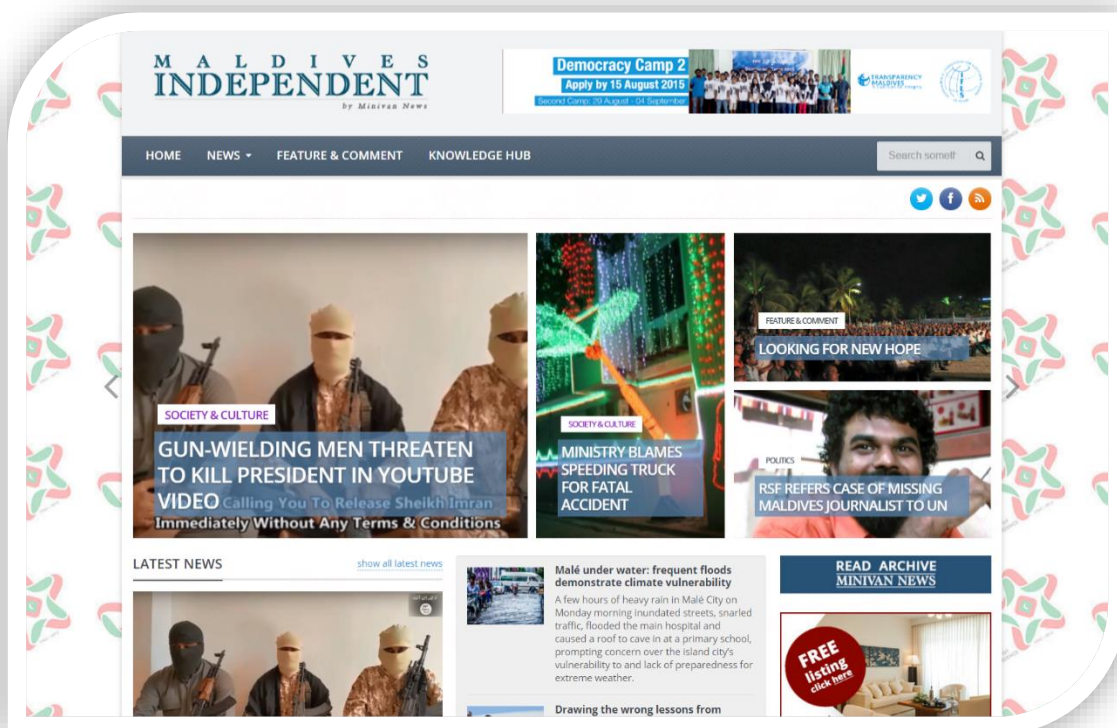
“We have a small team and we can’t cover advertisers’ press conferences before we cover all the news,” she says, adding that she is currently negotiating the transfer of all advertising to a third-party marketing firm “so I don’t have to worry about it. We run on such a small budget that it’s doable without having to run advertorials,” she says.

The site is currently getting 6,000 to 7,000 hits a day, says Rasheed, buoyed by the current political crisis.

“Facebook and Twitter are delivering a lot more hits; we need to start sponsoring stories a bit more,” she says. “We have 5,000 Facebook likes and I’ve noticed that if we post at the right time, really good stories will reach 2,500 people and 200 will click through to read. If we can get the likes up, then our story reach will grow.” With the site’s current traffic she believes that *Maldives Independent* should be generating a monthly income of about \$13,000. “If we can get to MVR \$9,700 then we’ll be really good to go,” she says.

“Peanuts. We’re running on peanuts.”

*Disclosure: The author was editor of Minivan News from 2009 to 2013*



## INDIASPEND – India (136<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Christine Homan and Kristen Grennan*

***IndiaSpend* is an online news organization that presents data in a way that is understandable to the general public while also holding the Indian government accountable through fact checking.**

Responding to widespread unhappiness about government corruption, *IndiaSpend* was started in 2011 by Govindraj Ethiraj, a television and print journalist and former Founder Editor in Chief of Bloomberg TV India.<sup>96</sup>

### **SNAPSHOT – *Indiaspend***

- 100% donor funded
- Data sourced in 16 different local languages
- Editors: 3, Writers: 4, Web Developers: 2
- Facebook likes: 5,055  
Twitter followers: 9,223

In 2011, anti-corruption activist, Anna Hazare went on a hunger strike and used preexisting government transparency legislation to force the government to create an anti-corruption ombudsman.<sup>97</sup> Hazare's efforts fueled the public's zeal in accessing government data and using that data to hold the government and politicians accountable. According to Aruna Roy, owner of the Indian non-profit Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS), "The right to information law has enabled people to ask important questions about

### **INNOVATIONS – *Indiaspend***

- Launched and funded in wake of political event: Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement
- Data for stories sourced through public data, multilateral organization reports, and Right to Information requests
- Increases reach through partnerships with offline media organizations, such as print, radio, and television
- Transparent where data used is of poor quality

<sup>96</sup> "About *IndiaSpend*." *India Spend*. <http://www.indiaspend.com/about>. Accessed: 8/25/2015.

<sup>97</sup> The Guardian. August 23, 2011. "Anna Hazare's anti-corruption protest sees Delhi signal compromise." The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/aug/23/anna-hazare-anti-corruption-protest> Accessed: 8/17/2015.

government and has unearthed fraud, corruption and poor governance.”<sup>98</sup> Despite this new wave of interest in data in 2011, data-driven journalism was not well developed, and *IndiaSpend* became India’s first data journalism initiative.<sup>99</sup> Today, India’s mainstream media is beginning to undertake more data journalism.

*IndiaSpend* has three editors, four writers/analysts, and two web developers on staff.<sup>100</sup> It also hires freelance reporters as needed.

The publication looks at new NGO reports, social media trends, or current events to find subjects that are in need of further data or exploration. As a result, *IndiaSpend* is not a breaking news site, but rather an in-depth, data-driven news outlet focusing on national and local issues in India. Its data sources include government websites, multilateral organization reports, and Right to Information requests (RTIs) that individuals or organizations can file to access government data. After receiving the request, the government is obligated to respond within 30 days. Because the RTI process can be lengthy, RTIs are seen as a last resort and are only requested when *IndiaSpend* cannot find the data on a public/government database or when there is no other data available.

However, Prachi Salve, a policy analyst and writer at *IndiaSpend*, points out that the problem for *IndiaSpend* (as well as the public) is not necessarily a dearth of available data, but this data’s questionable quality and the difficulty of understanding or using it. The data may be incoherent, confusing, or too complicated for a layperson. Furthermore, India has 16 official languages<sup>101</sup> (as well as many more local languages), which creates frequent translation problems. Data from local governments is in the local, not national, language.

*IndiaSpend* sometimes finds conflicting sets of data. When this happens, Salve says, *IndiaSpend* publishes and explains both of them. A key challenge lies in finding important data while also bolstering the organization’s image as a thought-leader for its continued efforts to access and analyze data that could otherwise be unusable.

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<sup>98</sup> Roy, Aruna. April 10, 2012. “How the UK Can Learn from India’s Right to Information Act.” *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/apr/10/india-freedom-of-information> Accessed: 8/18/2015.

<sup>99</sup> *IndiaSpend*. “About Us.” <http://www.indiaspend.com/about>. Accessed: 8/18/2015.

<sup>100</sup> For full list of staff and their bios, see here: <http://www.indiaspend.com/about/our-team>. Accessed: 8/31/2015

<sup>101</sup> *CIA World Fact Book*. “India.” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

Data transparency tends to decrease at the lower government levels; data at the village level is almost nonexistent. While more data is available at the national level, it is not uncommon for the government to hide reports that it deems embarrassing or to discontinue annual studies after receiving bad results. Salve cited examples of air quality studies that were taken offline and child marriage reports that were discontinued after 2005/2006. Salve said that this lack of data transparency, “hinders policymaking because it is removed from reality. Yes, it is embarrassing that there is a high rate of malnutrition in the world’s fastest growing democracy, but we need that information to make public policy changes.”

Although India’s internet penetration rate stood at only 18% in 2014,<sup>102</sup> Salve noted that *IndiaSpend* works with media partners across a variety of platforms—not all of them web-based. As she pointed out, “internet penetration had an influence on our site about two or three years ago, but [today] we have a lot of partners, so our content is picked up by other print and online newspapers—and even television.”

For the approximately 228 million Indians who do have internet connections,<sup>103</sup> social media remains a common method of disseminating information. Facebook is the third most visited website in India and Twitter is the eleventh.<sup>104</sup> In fact, most of the traffic to *IndiaSpend* comes from social media. *IndiaSpend* has 5,055 followers on Facebook and 9,223 on Twitter. (It also has a weekly newsletter.) According to Salve, an organization’s ability to use social media effectively “depends on who you are trying to reach. Data is big with techies and the middle class, who are on Twitter—and that is why it works for us.”

To further expand its reach, *IndiaSpend* has partnered with grassroots organizations to help with their communications campaigns. *IndiaSpend* works together with international non-profits such as the UK-based Action Aid (which focuses on homeless issues) and Save the Children, as well as local Indian partners such as Khabar Lehriya (a news organization run by women in Madhya Pradesh). *IndiaSpend*’s reports have helped organizations make their data more accessible

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<sup>102</sup> World Bank. “Internet Users (Per 100 People).” <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

<sup>103</sup> Calculated by author based on World Bank data.

<sup>104</sup> Alexa. “Top Sites in India.” <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/IN>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

to the public and highlight the wider implications that these studies have on India society.

*IndiaSpend* is a non-profit that is primarily funded by grants and donations. Initial start-up funding came from the board of trustees.<sup>105</sup> Today, most of its earnings are donations that the organization accepts through its website. It also receives some small revenue from Google ads. However, Salve noted that “we function more like a cash-strapped think tank than a media organization,” referring to the reliance predominantly on donations rather than advertising revenue or product sales. To ensure editorial independence, donors have no say in what is published. According to Salve, “they donate because they like the work *IndiaSpend* is doing and want it continue.” She expects that the potential impact of major donations on editorial decisions will become a greater concern as *IndiaSpend* grows.

Being a media organization dedicated to data-driven journalism is not without its difficulties. Government pushback is an ongoing problem. Salve conceded that “transparency is a sticky issue with the government. As a result [of pushing the government to increase its transparency,] it becomes harder to get the needed certificates/licenses that are necessary for international funding. This affects our funding revenues internationally, and therefore we are dependent on national [sources of] funding.” Additionally, Salve noted that the government is required to respond to RTIs within one month, but it is easy for government officials to deliberately stall on delivering data. This type of delay is particularly common for state governments.

Since its inception, *IndiaSpend* has tried to be “an agency of record and to provide all the unbiased data the public could want,” Salve said, but recently, its priorities have shifted and become more focused. “Today our goal is to make sure the content we write is taken up by people that matter. If we want [India] to succeed as a democracy, information needs to be available.” *IndiaSpend* sees the data and news that it provides as essential for the public to develop informed opinions that can make change for the nation—and this very focus is what has helped *IndiaSpend* to become so successful. According to Salve, “why we have come so far is because we are neutral. We do not put forth opinion; it is all information.”

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<sup>105</sup> For biographies of the board of trustee members, see here: <http://www.indiaspend.com/about/trustees>.



# GRAM VAANI – India (136<sup>th</sup>)

*Interviewed by JJ Robinson*



**Phone-based social networking service developed in India and targeting rural populations lacking other forms of media, typically due to lack of infrastructure and low rates of literacy.**

## **SNAPSHOT – *Gram Vaani***

- Internet penetration (2013): 18 percent
- Rural population: 857 million
- 400,000 users, 5000 calls a day
- Latest equity investment: \$500,000

*Gram Vaani* (or “voice of the village”) is a social technology firm founded in 2009 that developed out of the Indian Institute of Technology based in Delhi, dedicated to connecting the country's 857 million people who live in rural areas with little infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

The company initially won a \$200,000 grant from the Knight Foundation to develop a low-cost and easy-to-use platform for running community radio stations (Gramin Radio Inter-Networking System, or GRINS). However it was *Gram Vaani's* second undertaking, *Mobile Vaani*, that truly garnered attention.

The system is a telephone-based social networking service. Users dial a number for their region, which disconnects and calls them back to avoid charging the listeners. Users can then listen to programs and submit their own content.

## **INNOVATIONS – *Gram Vaani***

- Phone-based media distribution service, operating much like a cellular radio station and able to serve audiences lacking internet infrastructure (and literacy)
- In combination with a content partner, this distribution mechanism can market to audiences unreachable or overlooked by conventional media (both donor advocacy messaging and commercial advertising)
- Distribution mechanism sidesteps restrictive government legislation around radio broadcasting; a more accessible alternative to shortwave radio with greater potential for audience engagement.
- GRINS - a low-cost (apache free software license) technology solution for small radio stations

While this content is moderated, *Mobile Vaani* itself is more of a distribution service than a content provider—a social network rather than a media outlet. But it solves two major media distribution challenges in the country.

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“There has been a huge fiasco over [radio] licensing. If you apply now, you could receive a license in 5-7 years.”

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- *Sayonee Chatterjee,*  
*Program Innovations Manager*

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First, for all the acclaim that India’s technology and IT services sector has received, the country’s overall internet penetration rate in 2014 was just 18 percent of its 1.2 billion population.<sup>2</sup> And second, India struggles with one of world’s lowest rates of adult literacy (a mere 63 percent<sup>3</sup>) with up to half of the rural population unable to read or write. This limits the potential impact of online media outlets—or any print medium, for that matter—even in areas where they are available.

*Mobile Vaani* circumvents these obstacles by connecting the media ‘dark regions’ using infrastructure that is available: mobile telephony. The organization’s Program Innovations Manager, Sayonee Chatterjee, explains that callers can listen in or record their own content, which is moderated, tagged and broadcast. Much like conventional social media services such as reddit, users can ‘like’ items and rate them up and down.

“We generally encourage people to talk about hyperlocal state or community issues, entertainment—things like folk songs, poetry—as well as social issues,” says Chatterjee. “Things like child marriage, empowerment of women, domestic violence, information about strikes, how to take advantage of government schemes, or care for pregnant women.”

The content items are grouped into slots organized by topic, such as agriculture and entertainment. Moderation of submitted items is limited to ensuring that the content meets a minimum level of audio quality and is not abusive or inflammatory. Volunteers are recruited at the local level (often they are people like teachers) to promote the service, hold meetings and produce items using a number free from moderation, and are compensated for their time and performance.



However, the Indian government has been reluctant to allow the spread of private radio, and the medium is surprisingly restrictive. Broadcasting news on FM frequencies is banned, and the government has increased spectrum fees beyond the reach of most community radio stations. As a result, radio in India is under-developed and attracts little advertising revenue relative to the market.

“There has been a huge fiasco over licensing. If you apply now, you could receive a license in 5 to 7 years,” says Chatterjee. “We realized that our scope was limited to a huge extent, so we thought about how we could create technology to reach media dark regions.”

Chatterjee says the idea for *Mobile Vaani* arose after the realization that the scope for conventional community radio in India—and *Gram Vaani's* first project—was limited due to the government’s harsh restrictions on radio broadcasting. “We thought [community radio] was the way,” she says. “They are very hyperlocal, often with a reach of no more than 10 to 15 square kilometers. Our software could be deployed for INR 35,000 (US\$550) compared to INR 2-3 lakh (US\$4,300-6,400) for other software. There was a huge gap in price.”

*Mobile Vaani*, as an internet service operating over a phone network, dodges obstacles that are legal and legislative in nature as much as technological. “Our main aim is to reach people at the bottom of pyramid, who have no access to internet or even TV,” explains Chatterjee.

With mobile devices commonly shared among a family or community, *Gram Vaani* has effectively enabled the mobile phone to become a FM radio. The group’s research shows that it is common for the service to be listened to by groups of seven or eight people, who call between 6 and 8 in the morning before going to the field to work, and then call again during their afternoon recess (between 2pm and 5pm), and again in the evening (after 8-9pm).

“We initially chose to launch in Jharkhand, a tribal state that is very rich in natural resources but is still one of the poorest in India,” says Chatterjee. “Slowly the model evolved as we received ideas from the community about what they wanted to listen to.” That, apparently, is “more entertainment,” she says. “We’re really not looking forward to becoming an FM channel.”

*Gram Vaani* claims that the service now receives 5,000 calls a day, with a reach of 400,000 users and an average engagement of eight minutes. Its penetration has attracted donors struggling to effectively reach rural and remote populations—“voices in the field”—and has given *Mobile Vaani* a revenue stream in the form of sponsored social advocacy content. Having proved the concept, in 2013 *Gram Vaani* raised a further \$500,000 in equity investment from the Indian Angel Network and Digital News Ventures, a seeding arm of the Media Development and Investment Fund (MDIF).<sup>4</sup>

In some respects, the service risks becoming a victim of its own success. Calling listeners back ensures that the service remains free for them, but absorbing this cost is *Gram Vaani's* greatest expense. Mobile providers have been reluctant to negotiate special rates, says Chatterjee, which has forced *Mobile Vaani* into a race to monetize before it becomes widely successful. The company also has to fund its technology and support teams, a two-person business development team, field workers, its volunteer incentive program, and a team of moderators reviewing every item of content.

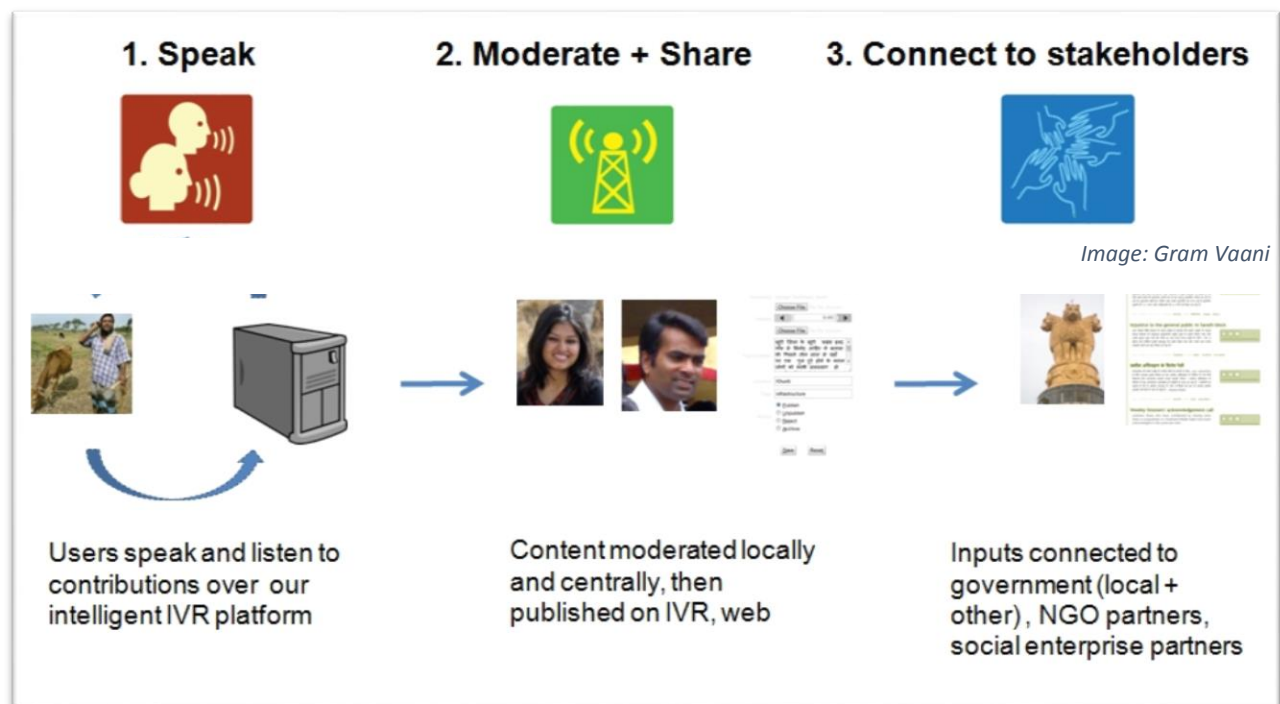
The organization sees potential in advertising and is currently actively recruiting ad agencies. Unlike print media, *Mobile Vaani* is able to track and profile its audience's preferences through their phone numbers. Somebody living off the electricity grid or listening to agricultural programs might be in the market for a tractor or solar lamp, they reason. The company is also considering charging marginal fees for accessing content such as employment advertising.

*Mobile Vaani* would be an ideal distribution model for radio programming in areas with limited internet, accessible anywhere within cellular range and offering both greater reach than conventional community radio and a smaller physical footprint—a factor that makes it harder to target in politically contentious places. *Gram Vaani* has dabbled in content, with programs offering market information (“how much a tomato is worth”) and Q&A sessions with experts answering listeners' questions, but it intends to remain foremost a technology company rather than a content provider.

A good sign for the model is that it has already been successfully exported and tested in other markets. *Mobile Mahaal* in Afghanistan, for example, received

300,000 calls a month in 2012, broadcasting editorial content produced by a local news agency Media Support Partnership Afghanistan (MSPA).

Using mobile phones to receive and play radio broadcasting over speaker might seem an odd substitute for conventional radio, but in places where radio is controlled, limited or otherwise unavailable, a *Mobile Vaani*-style system is an elegant solution to several very difficult problems.



## ***Ziber* – Jordan (143<sup>rd</sup>)**



*Interview by JJ Robinson*

***Ziber* (pronounced “hiber,” after the Arabic word for 7 meaning “haa,” or “ink”), is a community-focused journalism website in Jordan with an emphasis on multimedia.**

### **SNAPSHOT – *Ziber***

- 40-50% of funding: via European Endowment for Democracy
- Average revenue from a 4-5 day workshop: \$4000
- 100,000 - 150,000 hits per month
- Facebook: 214,000 likes  
fans on Facebook, Twitter: 47,500 followers

*Ziber* is an online publication in Jordan founded in 2007 as a platform for citizen journalism. “It started as a collective born out of the blogosphere,” says Editor in Chief Lina Ejeilat. “The idea was to take what was good about blogging—providing stories you don’t see in the mainstream media—and to combine it with an organized collective of editors.”

Initial uptake of the site by citizen journalists who were supposed to be embracing the new platform did not match the founders’ optimism.

“It didn’t go the way we thought. We weren’t showered with contributions, and we struggled to get content on the website,” says Ejeilat. “Eventually we realized that we needed to have a presence offline, holding events and activities to build relationships and create a community to produce content for the site.”

*Ziber* began holding workshops on blogging, video storytelling, writing and photography, encouraging people to tell stories and put their ideas in writing. During the early years, the team of six running the site, including three co-founders, all held full or part time jobs. At the time, donors were generally unwilling to fund content, but were inclined to fund workshops and training. *Ziber*

### **INNOVATIONS – *Ziber***

- Outsourcing the skills of a content and production team to generate revenue from training workshops and consultancy work
- Using public events and a physical space to generate a community around a publication
- Consider grant seeking and related administration a full time job comparable to a business development role

was registered in 2009 in Jordan as a company providing training in media and digital storytelling and began to hold workshops across Jordan funded by various donor organizations. On the side, it aimed to grow a steady source of citizen-generated content for its website.

“While the training was a good source of income, we weren’t able to get good content out of short training workshops,” Ejeilat says. “I’m sure there are ways for [workshops] to be effective. But there’s very little you can achieve in two days, and generally the people coming are not paying for it. Maybe you can open a few eyes or impart a few skills, but [donors] expected that afterward people would go out and produce things. More often they do not, and if so, not at the quality we aspired to. It doesn’t immediately tie into the work they do every day, and is not connected to their real needs.”

While the training did not generate the flood of content *Ziber* was hoping for, it did help the organization build a large network across Jordan and nearby countries like Egypt and Lebanon.

The contributed content flooded in with the birth of the Arab Spring, “2011 was a big turning point,” Ejeilat says. “With the Arab Spring came a sudden huge leap forward in terms of people’s eagerness to express themselves and talk about issues they had not discussed before. It was perfect for us. We just happened to be there before social media became super trendy.”

*Ziber* began to publish articles on subjects that were taboo and controversial, receiving daily contributions of high quality. In mid-2010, an independent arts NGO offered the outlet a residency, including a space, which *Ziber* used to hold meetings and discussions with bloggers. When the Arab Spring began, *Ziber* used the space to organize debates about political issues at the forefront of online discussions. “People would come in to discuss things like constitutional reform, or the role of intelligence in political life,” recalls Ejeilat.

*Ziber* had successfully grown its audience, but by the end of 2011 the momentum was waning. Cynicism was settling in as the situation in Syria and Libya deteriorated. “We decided we could not sit back and rely on contributed content,” says Ejeilat.

*Ziber* began to win major grants from an array of donors including the Open Society Foundations, International Media Support (IMS), and the Swiss and Dutch embassies. The largest grant, from the European Endowment for Democracy, provides core funding and currently covers 50-60 percent of *Ziber's* operations, while the Danish IMS supports story projects and multimedia packages and offers capacity building for *Ziber's* team.

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**“While the training was a good source of income, we weren’t able to get good content out of short training workshops.”**

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- *Lina Ejeilat, Editor-in-chief*

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“Sometimes we pitch stories and change them if the journalism doesn’t work—this sort of flexibility is important to us,” Ejeilat says.

*Ziber* published stories about migrant workers in Jordanian garment factories, ran pieces about marginalized disabled athletes, exposed a culture of book censorship by the Jordanian government, and posted articles about the sexual health of Arab women. The evolution into an online magazine finally saw *Ziber* run up against Jordanian authorities, who insisted that it was illegitimate and took it to court on the grounds that it was not a licensed media publication. Ejeilat says that the problem is now resolved, but by 2014 the site had been blocked four times.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the publication also began to consider its own sustainability and the prospect of diversifying its revenue beyond grants. “We had a target to grow our traffic and develop forms of advertising, but that’s impossible when you are jumping domains because of being blocked,” says Ejeilat.

*Ziber* outsources staff for training and consultancy projects, teaching communications strategy to organizations and providing training in social media. A 4-5 day workshop can bring in \$4,000 in revenue, but the publication has found itself having to turn down offers out of concern for losing senior editors for lengthy periods and compromising its own content.

Managing grants and reporting to donors is also a big commitment, explains Ejeilat. “It really is a full-time job, between looking for grants, following up on proposals we do get, making sure we’re on target with regular reporting. But I feel that this is the same as having someone doing business development or advertising sales.”



فنون وثقافة

موسيقى «من نفس الناس»: فنانون عرب يتجهون نحو الجمهور لتمويل مشاريعهم



رياضة واستشفائي

الباركود في مصر: لعبة تستعيد الشارع



كيف ينذر مشروع في الشونة الوسطى بفشل اللامركزية

#### Amman Events Calendar | رزنامة فعاليات عمان

**1 September**  
معرض: طقوس الإشارات والتحولات  
1995 - 1975 [Exhibition: Rituals of Signs and Transitions 1975-1995]

**1 September**  
مهرجان أردنتا | Made in Jordan

**1 September**  
معرض فني: وجوه ضد الحرب  
Exhibition: Faces Opposed to War



هذا الأسبوع في عمان:

حكايا، موسيقيون أردنيون، مسرحية

غنائية، والمزيد

#### Hakaya, "Made in Jordan", Films and More

Highlights of the arts and culture events in Amman this week,  
August 30 - September 5



#### آخر المواد

#### حكايا، موسيقيون أردنيون، مسرحية غنائية، والمزيد

أبرز الفعاليات الثقافية والفنية في عمان هذا الأسبوع، 30 آب - 5 أيلول 2015.



# ***MALAYSIAKINI* – Malaysia (147<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by JJ Robinson*

***Malaysiakini* is an independent news outlet in Malaysia publishing in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil. It employs 40 reporters and has successfully monetized a paywall model while navigating a repressive media climate.**

## **SNAPSHOT – *Malaysiakini***

- MDIF: US\$350,000 invested in 2002 for a 29 stake
- 16,039 subscribers paying an average US\$13.80
- Income: 40% subscription, 60% advertising

Proving that independent media can reach profitability has made independent online news service *Malaysiakini* a favorite case study in the media development community, but the factors contributing to its success deserve repeating.

Malaysia suffers from a highly restrictive media environment. The majority of media is state controlled, and the government is quick to level lawsuits and charges of sedition against detractors. *Malaysiakini* has managed to overcome these obstacles and to not only survive financially, but thrive.

Malaysia has high levels of literacy, a high internet penetration rate (67 percent), and a progressive 1998 law banning censorship of the internet. In 1999 two Malaysian journalists at the Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper *The Sun*, Steven Gan and Premesh Chandran, saw an opportunity to use this law to escape editorial controls. They started *Malaysiakini* as a purely online platform with \$10,000 of their own money. Subsequent investments and grants came from Open Society, the National Endowment for Democracy and the Media Development and

## **INNOVATIONS – *Malaysiakini***

- Multiple languages, of which only English and Mandarin are paywalled, allowing to have a subscription base and a large audience attractive to advertisers
- Size, success and impact on elections makes the publication difficult to target outside frivolous legal action
- Buying and owning premises provides security, avoids issues with manipulative landlord
- Investment and business development provided by MDIF



Investment Fund (MDIF). Crucially, the latter provided business development support as well as funding.

Covering the country's turbulent politics with a new and aggressive independent style saw *Malaysiakini*'s early audience swell to over 100,000 daily readers. The dotcom boom saw a surge in online advertising revenue, and the prognosis seemed positive. However, with the burst of the bubble and plunging revenue, *Malaysiakini* faced existential questions about its future.

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**"We have broken even every year since 2004, with the exception of 2010."**

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- Premesh Chandran,  
Co-founder

"We put up a paywall in 2002, three years after we launched," says Chandran. "We couldn't get enough ad revenue and we didn't have any other option, so we decided to charge a subscription fee and see if we could survive that way."

The paywall led *Malaysiakini*'s audience to plunge from 100,000 to just 1,000 overnight. "People generally don't want to pay for content; that was true then and that is true now," recalls Chandran. "It was tough and it took a long time to build the subscription base. In the first year we only managed to get around a thousand readers to subscribe."

The number of subscribers reached 16,039 in late 2014, each paying an average of \$13.80 for a year's access according to a recent report on the outlet by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). That support base helps fund 40 journalists producing content in four languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil (of which only the English and Chinese sites are paywalled).

Chandran credits *Malaysiakini*'s growth to Malaysia's turbulent politics and the demand for independent content; the government's repression of other media has made it an ironic ally to the publication's success. "It is hard to see the growth of *Malaysiakini* without the repression of press freedom and upheavals that followed a challenge to a repressive government," he says.

The decision to launch online was pragmatic: "We knew the government wouldn't give us a license for a newspaper. In the beginning they started by ignoring us. Then in 2001 they came down heavily, raiding our office. We managed to stay afloat, and they began to put pressure on advertisers to and make life difficult for

us. But over time we were able to look at different revenue streams and slowly grow.”

The government’s pressure on advertisers was difficult to prove. However politics and business are intertwined in Malaysia, and the passive effect was to encourage risk-averse businesses to invest their marketing budgets in safer areas.

By the time the publication decided to introduce a subscriber model, “we didn’t have much advertising, so [the lower readership] didn’t have much of an effect,” Chandran says. “We weren’t selling ads, and we weren’t earning money, so it didn’t make a difference. We didn’t have any choice; we needed a revenue scheme, or we were going to have to close shop.”

The MDIF saw potential in the publication, and in 2002 invested \$350,000 for a 29-percent stake in the company.

*Malaysiakini* now receives 40 percent of its nearly \$1.5 million in annual revenue (2013) from subscription fees and 60 percent from advertising. It has 16,000 paid subscribers, but with all the visitors to the free sites counted together, it now pulls a daily audience of two million unique visitors.

“We have broken even every year since 2004, with the exception of 2010. Advertising only really picked up after the 2008 general election, and in the early days subscription was 90 percent of revenue. Now it is 40 percent,” Chandran says.

*Malaysiakini* has also survived by keeping its staff lean. It employs a total of 60 people, and is able to pay less than the market rate for top talent because of its strong, credible brand.

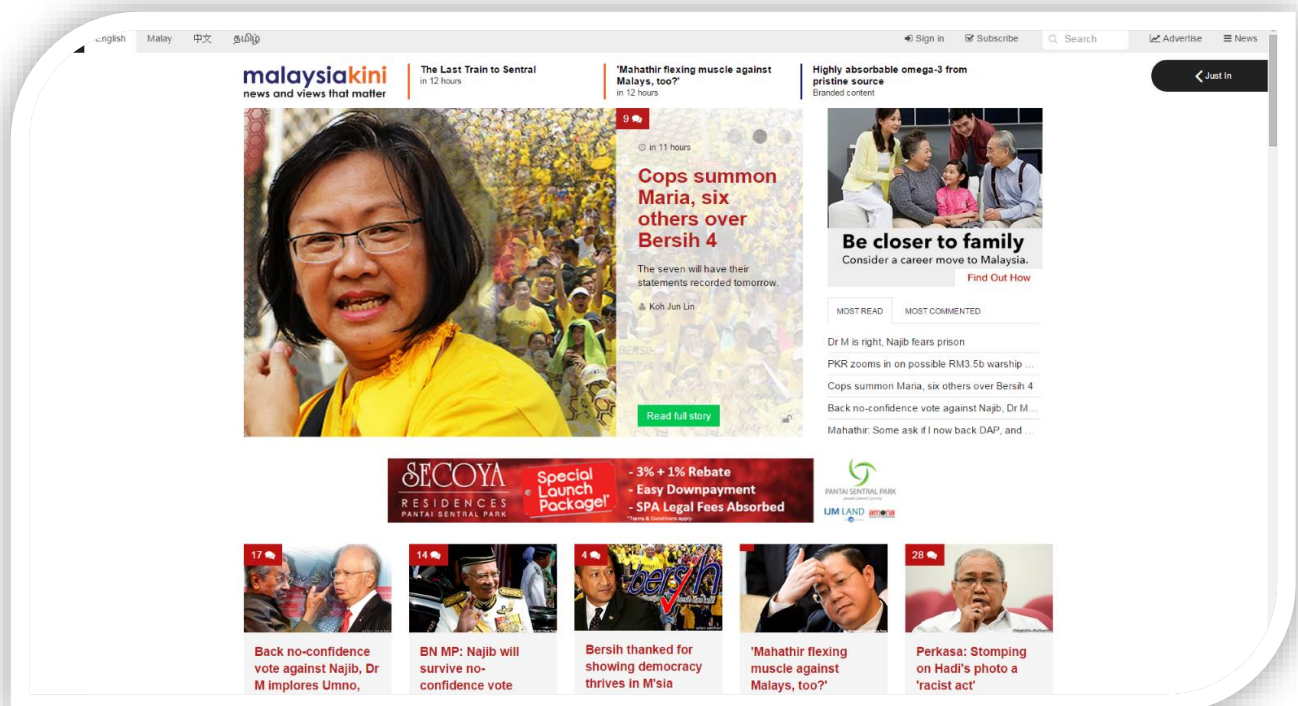
The site’s popularity and legitimacy have been buoyed by the government’s aggressive legal attentions: the Malaysian Prime Minister and the ruling party are currently suing the publication for defamation, and a journalist was recently questioned under the country’s sedition laws. The judiciary is hardly independent, so the site must depend on its wits and its audience for survival. At the same time, *Malaysiakini*’s popularity has made it impossible for the government to ignore, while its size and visibility have made it a difficult target for any action other than legal harassment through the judiciary.

“In the 2008 election, 13 percent of voters read *Malaysiakini*,” notes Chandran. “We were the number one source of information on the election.”

Videos on the site are downloaded and duplicated on CDs and distributed by its readers to those without internet access. The company was recently able to raise \$500,000 from its fan base in a ‘Buy a brick’ drive to fund a new building, freeing it from a major overhead cost and the political vulnerability having a landlord (who can be influenced or otherwise mercurial). The publication has also recently expanded with a website offering business news and an online television station.

*Malaysiakini* is applying for a print license. The government took the site’s application to court, but remarkably, *Malaysiakini* won on appeal. Now the site is seeking a court order forcing the government to comply with the earlier verdict.

“It’s an ongoing process that depends on luck,” says Chandran.



# ANIMAL POLITICO – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

Founded in 2010, *Animal Político* is a veteran among Mexico's new generation of digital media start-ups. The site focuses on political and public policy-related news and has generated a wide following among young, digitally literate Mexicans. The company's founders have worked to build up a diverse portfolio of ad buyers and supplement their income by producing ads, but are still working to increase revenues and achieve financial stability.

## SNAPSHOT – *Animal Político*

- 4.5 million page views a month
- More than a million followers on Facebook
- 16 full time staff members

*Animal Politico* is one of Mexico's most successful online news sites. The site was launched by veteran journalist Daniel Moreno and a small team of collaborators in 2010. One innovative strategy the group employed was to start as a Twitter news account (@PajaroPolitico) and build a following before launching the website. *Animal Politico's* Twitter account now has nearly one million followers. Overall the site generates more than 4.5 million pageviews a month.

Other innovative strategies that the site has employed are partnering with external organizations to do in-depth research projects and create a food section to increase web traffic. In addition to looking for funding from several major international philanthropic organizations, *Animal Político* also produces advertising for clients.

## INNOVATIONS – *Animal Político*

- Partnerships with international philanthropic groups on long-term research projects help fund in-depth reporting and bring in original data analysis to articles.
- Building a diverse portfolio of ad clients helps preserve editorial independence.
- Creating a mini-site focused on food helped boost web traffic without damaging the brand of the primary site.
- Even though *Animal Político* has succeeded in generating revenue they've kept their team small to help keep costs low

Overall, however, despite attracting a steady flow of loyal readers, *Animal Político* is not generating huge amounts of income. “We aspire to be a business. Basically we want the independence to do the best journalism. We don’t plan to become millionaires. We want to be profitable. We’re not an organization that wants to survive by looking for funding. We want to be sustainable,” Moreno says. So far Moreno considers the site to have built up a successful financial model that should lead towards higher profitability in the future. “We have diverse income streams. We have different kinds of ads. We are on solid ground, economically,” he says.

A key lesson for small media outlets that worry about compromising their editorial independence by depending on particular advertisers for revenue is *Animal Político*’s efforts to develop a full portfolio of ad buyers. “Having a larger number of ad buyers prevents you from depending on one source. Clients have different campaigns. You lose a client, you get another. That’s how the ad world works,” Moreno says.

Another lesson that *Animal Político* has to offer is its singular focus on digital journalism. While other young start-ups may diffuse their efforts by experimenting with radio, print, or TV, *Animal Político* focuses all of the energy on its web content and outreach through social media. “We don’t do digital journalism just because we can’t afford print. We don’t plan to make a print publication,” Moreno says. His main goal is establishing a strong connection with Mexico’s young, digitally literate population.

“We want to access readers under age 35 and tell them what’s going on and keep them interested in what’s happening,” Moreno says. He’s comfortably growing the site organically rather than seeking out any sort of funding that could compromise editorial independence. “First and foremost [our goal] is doing journalism and maintaining editorial independence. We need enough readers to show that we are interesting but we don’t want to be the biggest site in Mexico. But, with 3 million visitors we are relevant. We want to be relevant,” Moreno explains.

With recurring and in-depth coverage of issues such as Mexico’s struggles to reduce poverty and inequality and the country’s problems with kidnapping and forced disappearances, *Animal Político* has carved out a space for itself with

media coverage not found on Mexico's dominant TV stations and biggest newspapers. It's a business model that is working for Moreno. "We won't be millionaires but we also want to earn money. We want to earn to grow our staff and do more journalism—earning money isn't the top priority. But it won't bother us either," he says.

## **Why our focus on Mexico**

Mexico's media market, like many other aspects of the country's economy, is a paradoxical mix of encouraging trends and ominous threats. Mexico enjoys a leadership role within Latin America's media sector, producing many of the region's best magazines, TV shows, movies, and newspapers.

This success has continued in the digital era with Mexican academics and news commentators embracing social media and helping contribute to a vibrant online political discussion and a new generation of digital news start-ups finding success in creating top-quality content and connecting with a new generation of readers.

At the same time, Mexico is still considered to be one of the most challenging places in the world to practice journalism. Many observers express concern over the role government advertising in traditional media may contribute to self-censorship and human rights groups classify Mexico as the most dangerous country in Latin America for journalists. A string of murders, disappearances, and brutal attacks against media professionals in Mexico over the last few years are a macabre reminder that although Mexico's government is evolving, there can still be a heavy price to pay for reporting on political corruption or collusion with criminal groups.

Within this context, the work of Mexico's vibrant new cluster of digital news start-ups is particularly important. Although many outlets are still relatively young they are finding ways to diversify their income streams and produce critical, analytical, and deeply reported articles. Faced with such serious challenges, Mexico's new media start-ups may offer important lessons for nascent digital news organizations in other markets

# CHIAPAS PARALELO – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

**An online news site based in the state of Chiapas in southern Mexico that focuses on news from a social, citizen's perspective.**

*Chiapas Paralelo* was founded in 2013 by journalists Angeles Mariscal, Isaín Mandujano, and Sandra De Los Santos and Sarelly Martínez, a professor at the Autonomous Chiapas University. After discussing the idea of creating an independent, online news portal for several years the founders brought the concept to life in August 2013. As with many new media start-ups in Mexico, the founders fund their project by continuing to work as professional journalists and educators. After two years of operating, the project is still not generating high levels of income but it has received attention from the state's residents.

## **SNAPSHOT – *Chiapas Paralelo***

- Less than \$300 a month in operating costs
- 29,000 followers on Facebook
- 60% of income comes from a donor
- A third of Chiapas locals have internet access

*Chiapas Paralelo* co-founder Angeles Mariscal says, "some days we have 20,000 [page-views]. It depends on what's happening in the state. We've had up to 40,000 a day, and as low as 3,000 a day."

For now, *Chiapas Paralelo* is an online-only news portal. Publishing online helps cut costs but it also means that the group's content is inaccessible for a large portion of their state's population. Chiapas is Mexico's poorest state. Nearly eight out ten of the state's residents work in the informal economy. Internet access and smart-phone usage are less common in Chiapas than in other parts of the country. Only a third of Chiapas' residents have internet access. The unique demographics of Chiapas, Mexico's southernmost state, a mountainous territory that contains

## **INNOVATIONS – *Chiapas Paralelo***

- Being an independent voice has helped *Chiapas Paralelo* win a loyal following
- Providing free access to content is essential for reaching low-income readers
- Cultivating a network of volunteer opinion writers helps keep costs low
- Founders use teaching jobs to help cover costs. Educational program could become part of company brand



some of Mexico's most isolated communities, have influenced *Chiapas Paralelo*'s plans for expansion.

"We've talked about doing an iPhone [app]—but it's not our priority. Our readers are here in the state. It's a state with limited access to technology. In some areas there's no cell phone service—so we are thinking about doing a weekly or monthly magazine and sharing content with people who aren't getting it now. We also want to do podcasts," Mariscal explains.

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- Angeles Mariscal, Co-founder

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Like many other independent political news start-ups in Mexico, *Chiapas Paralelo* has faced challenges in generating revenue through advertising. The state has a long history of government corruption scandals and the misuse of public funds. The state's former governor accumulated millions of dollars of debt and splurged on senseless projects. The current governor has faced heavy criticism for spending nearly \$10 million on self-promotion during his first year in office. *Chiapas Paralelo* frequently publishes op-ed pieces criticizing politicians for being corrupt and also runs news stories about citizens' complaints and demands for government accountability. The group's stated goal—providing news from a citizen's perspective and eschewing the strategy of acting as an outlet for government publicity—means that the site isn't likely to receive much advertising support from government agencies, the lifeline for many local media outlets in Mexico.

"We saw the need for news from a citizen's perspective. The media weren't meeting people's needs," Mariscal says. The founders of *Chiapas Paralelo* are trying to fill what they see as a gap in their state's media coverage. "In Chiapas there are a lot of digital portals. And traditional media also have web portals. But the difference is the content. We do real reporting," Mariscal explains.

While the site does generate enough income to cover basic costs, none of the founders receive a salary for their work. They do have a long-term goal of generating revenues of one million pesos (about \$60,000) per year. "Looking for ad buyers is very hard in Mexico. People in Mexico think buying ads means buying



control of the editorial content. So we think it's a long-term goal. We can get ads from social organizations. Ads from the private sector have been small so we are looking for other sectors," Mariscal says.

For now, the portal's strength is its ability to publish high-quality content while incurring limited costs. The founders don't pay for an office space. Costs are very low. The group's biggest expense is its server. They also pay for an accountant and a webmaster. They benefit from having contributors who write opinion pieces for free. *Chiapas Paralelo's* total operating budget is around 5,000 pesos (just under \$300) per month.

"We already feel modestly successful. The site is up, and in the public opinion, we are serving to inform a good percentage of the citizens. That's our goal, so we are successful. If people are consuming and consulting the information we generate – that's success. We are the second most read website in Chiapas," Mariscal says.



## EL DAILY POST – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***El Daily Post* is an English-language Mexico City based digital news site that focuses on covering the US-Mexico relations. The site has an innovative model that combines free online content with a paywall-protected subscriber-only newsletter on security issues. The site's founders also plan to create paid newsletters on business and energy issues. Founded in 2015, *El Daily Post* is still working to achieve profitability.**

### SNAPSHOT – *El Daily Post*

- Seed capital for 3 years
- 5 full-time staff
- Paywall content and subscriber-only newsletter

*El Daily Post* is a Mexico City based English-language digital news start-up that focuses on data visualizations and explainers. Octavio Riviera, the site's Editor in Chief says, "*El Daily Post* has the goal of explaining the complex relationship between the US and Mexico." The site's content is divided into five thematic categories. Riviera says, "the first [theme] is security—that's the most important topic in Mexico. The second topic is migration. Another is the business and economic relationship between the US and Mexico. The fourth theme is energy. The fifth is culture. Mexicans have a big migratory presence in the US. 33 million people have Mexican heritage. So music, food, culture—that's all important." *El Daily Post* was started by the media team who back *Animal Politico*, one of Mexico's most successful digital news sites and currently shares *Animal Politico*'s office in Mexico City.

*El Daily Post* has an innovative strategy. Unlike most other digital media start-ups in Mexico, *El Daily Post* places some of its content behind a paywall. "We want to

### INNOVATIONS – *El Daily Post*

- Shared content from a local partner news organization helps keep costs low for *El Daily Post*'s English language news coverage
- Establishing expertise in areas such as security, energy, and business helps support a hybrid model where subscribers pay for exclusive content in a paywall-protected newsletter
- Data visualizations and graphics help explain content issues in a way that can be easily shared on social media

have really solid content behind a paywall that people will pay for. We think we can get people to pay for the service. At the same time we want to build content that is high quality and open to the public,” Rivera explains. Currently, in addition to publishing free content on the site, *El Daily Post* also offers a subscriber-only newsletter on security issues. It also plans to expand its staff and create paywall-protected newsletters on business and energy issues.

“The concept came from the idea that the relationship between the US and Mexico is very complex and there’s a real absence of coverage,” Rivera says. *El Daily Post* can serve as a model for media start-ups interested in creating English language content to act as a portal for readers across the globe with an interest in local and national issues.

The partnership with *Animal Politico* (another news outlet described in this report) is an innovative model that can be copied in other markets. *El Daily Post* staff members translate a selection of *Animal Politico* articles, helping to create original content at a low price. *El Daily Post* team has also incorporated NewsCred, a platform that helps them bring in Mexico coverage from a variety of foreign news organizations. For now, Rivera and his team are focused on expanding their digital footprint and haven’t considered adopting any new platforms. “Before we think about another platform we want to have a very stable workflow—we want to put up ten articles a day,” he says.

Like other digital media start-ups in Mexico, *El Daily Post* faces the difficult task of balancing financial stability with editorial independence. For now, the company’s financial goals are relatively modest. “I want to earn enough to have a more robust team. I want the *Daily Post* to generate its own content. *NewsCred* and *Animal Politico* are good—but I want to have our own identity—I want to pay a group of freelancers and also pay staff journalists. After that, if we have enough money to keep expanding the team, that would be great,” Rivera says.

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**“I think you have to look for income from a lot of sources—you can’t depend on ad revenue.”**

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- Octavio Riviera,  
Editor in Chief

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Rivera does think that *El Daily Post* is on track to become profitable, or at least sustainable. “For us to make money we have to combine ad revenue with grants from outside institutions. Workshops and classes can be another source of income. I think you have to look for income from a lot of sources—you can’t depend on ad revenue,” he says.

Rivera also plans to partner with NGOs and other organizations to transform academic research reports into engaging articles by combining original reporting with strong academic research from partner institutions. This approach is part of a larger strategy of maximizing production of high-quality content while working to minimize costs. “I think there’s a rule when it comes to business: you have to start small and grow. We don’t want to spend unless we have to,” Rivera says.

Rivera, who worked for several major Mexican news magazines and also spent five years working in media in Texas, says that “traditional media [in Mexico] has turned their backs on the people—so high-quality journalism has to be the goal, that’s my personal goal. If the *Daily Post* can do it, I’ll be happy.” *El Daily Post* has enough seed capital to survive for three years. After that, self-generated revenue will be essential to help the project continue and maintain editorial independence.

Rivera says that in Mexico, “violence doesn’t limit journalism. It’s the media outlets that are limiting their own coverage. They let the government limit the coverage. Media outlets don’t cover violence not because they are scared of criminals; it’s that they are worried about their financial security.” (He does acknowledge that there are extreme cases in some parts of the country where organized crime groups send emissaries to inform editors on what they would and would not like to see in print.)

In rural parts of the country, where local politicians are often closely connected to organized crime groups, local media outlets have learned to survive (both literally and figuratively) by acting as mouthpieces for local politicians. In states such as Veracruz, Guerrero, Tamaulipas, Chihuahua and Sinaloa, engaging in critical journalism can be a death warrant. In Mexico City, however, Rivera thinks that the threat is less overt and the absence of a strong, critical fifth estate is less excusable. “In Mexico, media has prostituted itself to the government and I think that’s no longer necessary,” he says.

## EMEEQUIS – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***Emeequis* is a glossy, bi-weekly magazine and news site covering Mexican politics and culture that is based in Mexico City. Founded in 2006 *Emeequis* has achieved widespread acclaim for the quality of its reporting but is still working to achieve financial stability.**

### **SNAPSHOT – *Emeequis***

- 70 percent of income from ad sales
- 290,000 followers on Facebook.
- Founders used a corporate style strategy of selling voting and non-voting shares to the company's original financial backers

*Emeequis* is a successful Mexican news magazine that also runs a popular digital news portal. The magazine was launched in 2006 by staff members at Mexico's biggest newspaper, *El Universal*, who quit their jobs over concerns about censorship. The magazine has a small office in Mexico City's affluent Condesa neighborhood and publishes in-depth, long-form articles on a range of cultural and political topics. Recent articles in *Emeequis* include profiles of a prominent Mexican chef and a well-known Mexican adult movie star, and an in-depth feature on heavily armed citizen militias in the

country's southwest. The magazine has won acclaim for its reporting and a gathered a sizable base of readers. *Emeequis*, a name which spells out the Spanish pronunciation letters "M" and "X," has 290,000 followers on Facebook and 270,000 followers on Twitter.

Like other start-up media outlets in Mexico, however, *Emeequis* has struggled to translate critical acclaim into financial success. Vietnika Batres, one of the magazines founding editors says that she thinks the magazine is starting to get on track to become profitable. "I think so but it's very difficult," she says. Batres remains concerned about the magazine's medium-term financial stability.

### **INNOVATIONS – *Emeequis***

- *Emeequis*'s bi-weekly print magazine makes it unique among the country's start-up media companies.
- Covering a broad range of topics has helped *Emeequis* win fans by differentiating itself from competitors who focus more exclusively on crime and political scandals
- *Emeequis* has also established a sizable footprint on Facebook and Twitter

“In Mexico brands don’t want to advertise with political and social news. I don’t think we have [stability] yet. We’ve had stable moments, but we’re not in one now. All the media [here] is the same. They all face challenges with their budgets,” she explains. *Emeequis*, does however, have a unique model. The bi-weekly print publication schedule entails higher costs than a digital-only strategy but also generates revenue through sales and from higher-priced print ads.

The challenge for *Emeequis* is the balance between financial success and editorial independence. We want to “earn enough to pay [our] costs and have some profits to spend on other projects. But you don’t want to become dependent. You want to be independent,” Batres says. Right now, however, the magazine generates 30 percent of its income from print sales and 40 percent from government ads. While not as explicitly antigovernment as some other start-up media outlets in Mexico, *Emeequis* is seen as being independent.

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**“In Mexico brands don’t want to advertise with political and social news. I don’t think we have [stability] yet.”**

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- Vietnika Batres, Co-

After the murder of photojournalist Ruben Espinosa and activist Nadia Vera Perez in Mexico City when mass-market media companies such as Televisa, MVS, and *El Universal* ran stories that avoided the angle of political violence against journalists and activists in Mexico, *Emeequis* published a letter from Vera Perez’s friends that outlined the history of violence and threats she faced because of her activism. “We don’t want to depend on government ads,” Batres says.

Although not yet a profitable business, *Emeequis* has built its brand name and earned a sort of cultural currency. “Prestige and credibility—they are intangible, but they are part of success. We’ve achieved that. We are a media outlet that people consult. It hasn’t been easy to get this credibility. We’ve won a lot of prizes. They reflect the quality of our work,” Batres says.

## ***HORIZONTAL – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)***



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***Horizontal* is a Mexico City–based digital news start-up that focuses on public policy and politics. Founded in 2015, Horizontal is a nascent news portal, but it is already implementing an innovative business model that combines income from ad sales with income generated by organizing conferences and classes. The site is still working to achieve profitability.**

*Horizontal* was founded by Guillermo Osorno, the former editor of *Gatopardo*, one of Latin America’s most prestigious glossy long-form journalism magazines, and four other journalists. *Horizontal* focuses on covering political and economic issues from a left-of-center perspective with a focus on showing how power is distributed in Mexico. “We thought that there was a hole in political discussion in Mexico, especially for young people,” Osorno says.

### **SNAPSHOT – *Horizontal***

- 6 full-time employees.
- 100,000 visitors a month, 300,000 monthly page views
- Target: 16 percent earnings after 1.5 years

Rather than flooding the site with short, quickly written articles, *Horizontal* focuses on publishing longer, in-depth analysis pieces. Osorno, who is a graduate of Columbia University’s journalism program, explains: “We do analysis—it’s like Vox. Vox knows about public policy. They do more insightful pieces. That’s our model.”

Osorno also looked to another US publication, *The Atlantic*, and is emulating its strategy of organizing conferences on different public policy topics. *Horizontal* will also supplement its income by organizing classes. While he has no plans to move into print, Osorno does say that he plans to create a physical space to

### **INNOVATIONS – *Horizontal***

- Focusing on in-depth analysis rather than click-bait helps to build reputation
- *Horizontal* is able to capitalize on its expertise and organize conferences and classes to boost its income
- Small team, big ideas. Hiring a small team keeps costs low.
- Focusing on high-quality content helps attract web traffic and loyal readers



complement *Horizontal*'s online presence.

*Horizontal*'s six employees currently work out of Osorno's house, but they plan to move to an office that will serve as a meeting place, classroom, conference hall, and coffee shop. "We want to have a cultural center," Osorno says.

*Horizontal*'s business model is designed to help the start-up establish a broad-reaching brand and also create multiple revenue streams. "The project has three parts. One is selling ads. That's the hardest. The other is the education side; that's functioning well. And, [the third is] events; we've organized events and made some money from that. We'll also sell coffee and snacks at the cultural center," Osorno says.

Osorno realizes that for now, luxury brands aren't interested in buying ads. He is focusing on targeting his ad sales efforts towards companies that produce products for young people as well as a few government agencies. *Horizontal* is a young publication, and Osorno's goals for financial success are moderate in the short term.

"Paying our bills, paying salaries, paying contributors, paying for investigative journalism, that's our goal—and it's expensive and complicated. That's success for me," he explains. The focus for *Horizontal* is building a reputation for insightful analysis and quality journalism and working to translate that success into profitability.

"I think you have to get to break even after a year and half and then after that have earnings of 16 percent. That's our business plan. With that you can make adjustments. I come from different experiences where I spent a ton of money on content—so I learned from that, and this time we didn't make a huge website, we made a flexible one—with two or three updates a day, we are generating a lot of visits without generating a ton of stupid content. We have a small team. Our costs aren't high, and that allows us to function," Osorno says.

Mexico is a country defined by high levels of inequality. Its four wealthiest businessmen control 9 percent of the GDP. Overall, the people in the wealthiest

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**"I think you have to get to 'break even' by a year and half and then after that have earnings of 16 percent."**

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- Guillermo Osorno,  
Co-founder

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one percent of Mexico's population control 43 percent of the country's wealth. At the same time, more than 50 million of the country's residents live in poverty. One-tenth of the country's public schools don't have electricity. It's a dynamic that many critics say that Televisa (the Mexican TV giant that controls 70 percent of the country's broadcast TV market and is owned by a billionaire with close ties to Mexico's government) isn't doing enough to address. Other mass-market media outlets are also seen as having an uncomfortably close relationship with the government.

Focusing on critically examining public policy and impacting the public dialogue on income distribution and income inequality are two of Horizontal's biggest goals. For this reason, the site's editorial strategy is directly linked to its business strategy. Osorno wants his team to have the editorial freedom to publish what they want.

"We planned our business to have independence. We don't want to depend on ads—that's how the government can pressure you. We diversify our revenue," he says.



## ***LadoB* – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***LadoB* is a digital news portal based in the state of Puebla in central Mexico. It focuses on publishing critical magazine-style articles about politics and social issues. Founded in 2011, *LadoB* is still struggling to achieve profitability.**

Like many other digital media start-ups in Mexico, *LadoB* was founded by a group of professional journalists who left jobs at an established news organization over frustrations with self-censorship. Ernesto Aroche, the site's co-founder and current Executive Editor, says that *LadoB* is "news site that is like a hybrid between a magazine and news portal. We try to tell stories that are hard to find in traditional media. We are an alternative media in terms of our topics and also in how we are related to power."

### **SNAPSHOT – *LadoB***

- 2 full-time staff members
- 50,000 unique visitors
- No office
- Six co-founders sacked from previous job

The site was founded in 2011 after Aroche and six other journalists were fired during a dispute with editors at a different publication. Despite having a relatively limited presence on social media, with 5,000 followers on Twitter and 500 on Instagram, *LadoB* is pulling in 50,000 unique visitors a month, and logging more than 80,000 monthly pageviews. *LadoB* is online only. Acknowledging the fact that around half of Mexico's population lacks internet access, *LadoB* has also done radio and plans to do radio news broadcasts again in the future.

The state capital of Puebla, where *LadoB* is located, is home to a successful industrial economy, a number of prominent universities, and a robust private sector that could potentially provide a strong advertising budget for *LadoB*. Aroche, however, is reluctant to pursue business relationships that could compromise the site's independence. (Puebla after all, is the state where police

### **INNOVATIONS – *LadoB***

- A non-profit-style outlet focused more on social goals than on impartial journalism
- The site is funded through the staff's freelance journalism work, a model that could be consolidated under the *LadoB* brand-name
- The site survives by keeping costs low

were sent to detain and threaten a journalist who reported on a former governor's efforts to work with prominent local businessmen to suppress news about a sex abuse scandal.)

Because of the challenges of finding advertisers, *LadoB* has survived by keeping costs at a bare minimum. The site operates out of a virtual office, and the editorial team meets periodically in a borrowed office space in the state of Puebla. *LadoB* has only two full-time staff members and two part-time staff members. Aroche says, "we see the site as more of a non-profit than a business."

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**"We think of it as a media outlet, but not a business. We want the income to be equal to the costs."**

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- *Ernesto Aroche,*  
*Executive Editor*

His main goal is nonetheless achieving financial sustainability. "We want the site to be self-sufficient. We want to pay for stories and pay salaries. We want to grow. But we don't really consider it as a business. We think of it as a media outlet, but not a business, really. We want the income to be equal to the costs." He currently works with three of the original founding members; since they don't collect salaries from *LadoB*, they fund themselves through independent journalism work for other news organizations. It's a content generation model that could be brought under the official *LadoB* brand.

Looking at *LadoB*'s current financial state, Aroche says, "It's precarious. We have security for this year—but we don't know what will happen next year. [We don't know] if we'll continue with our commercial relationship with a university, so it's at risk. "

Still, Aroche is optimistic that in the medium term, producing quality journalism and attracting a steady flow of web traffic will win over private-sector ad buyers.

"I think in terms of journalism, the site is doing really well, and that has started to translate into financial success. I think the site is growing and it's becoming attractive as an advertising space, but really we need people to work on the business side of things," he says. *LadoB* has run stories criticizing elected officials and unlike many small-time media outlets that engage in pay-for-play, promotional style journalism, *LadoB* has not secured funding from local government agencies and political organizations.

“We want to be very transparent in terms of who is financing us and what our commercial relationships are,” Aroche says. So far that’s been an easy task, since the site relies on one local university for 100 percent of its ad budget. In the medium term Aroche and his team hope to diversity their income stream, but in the short term they are focused more on editorial agenda than on business goals.

“We want to be a media outlet that contributes to social change,” Aroche says.



## **LIBERACION – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***Liberacion* is an early-stage news website and biweekly print publication that is based in the city of Acapulco on Mexico's Pacific coast. The outlet focuses heavily on photojournalism and models itself as a magazine-style newspaper. Founded in mid-2015, *Liberacion* is an ambitious start-up with admirable plans to publish in-depth reporting and photography in an extremely challenging environment. Despite its early success, the company faces serious financial challenges.**

*Liberacion* is a start-up photo-centric magazine-style newspaper focused on political and cultural reporting that is based in the city of Acapulco in the state of Guerrero in southwestern Mexico.

"It's a magazine in the form of a newspaper. It comes out every two weeks and we want it to come out every week. That's our goal. We want to do social reports focused on the community's problems in Guerrero and really focusing on photography," founding Editor Pedro Pardo explains.

### **SNAPSHOT – *Liberacion***

- Two founding members who contribute most of the photos
- 5,000 copies printed fortnightly at a cost of US\$4,200 per issue
- Distributed free

*Liberacion* is a young start-up that offers lessons in the challenges of launching an independent media outlet in a difficult environment. Acapulco is one of the most violent cities in the world. In 2012 and 2013, Acapulco surpassed Ciudad Juarez to earn the unwelcome distinction of being the most violent city in Mexico. The state of Guerrero is regarded as being one of the most complicated and dangerous places in the country.

### **INNOVATIONS – *Liberacion***

- A dual print-digital publication strategy helps maximize exposure and readership for a target population characterized by high levels of poverty and economic informality
- Independent journalism for external clients help fund the publication of self-financed projects

While other parts of Mexico have industrialized rapidly and created new sources of employment for residents, Guerrero offers few formal jobs outside of the struggling tourism industry. Eight out of ten residents work in the informal economy, washing windows, running street-side mini-stores, or engaging in subsistence agriculture.

The state has been racked by a series of corruption scandals and in 2014 became the center of an international controversy after local police allegedly colluded with cartel hit-men to kidnap and “disappear” 43 students from the Ayotzinapa teacher training school. In recent years Acapulco’s reputation has been tarnished by daily reports of gangland murders, assaults, and kidnappings. As hotels and restaurants see their incomes fall, the private sector is becoming more hesitant to advertise in local media outlets.

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**“We owe some contributors. But there’s a lot of solidarity. We buy the content and people know we’ll pay eventually. We’ve only sold two ads so far.”**

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- *Pedro Pardo,*  
*founding editor*

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Pardo says, “We want to generate top-quality, critical, informative content. [But] we’re in a difficult stage—the economy in Guerrero is poor so it’s hard to get financing from the private sector. There are also universities that can invest, but it’s a very difficult process. Especially after the disappearance of the 43 students right now, it’s very hard to do business.”

From an editorial perspective, the biggest challenge is that the most available client for advertising is the local government, a benefactor whose funding often comes with conditions. “The government is really the entity that can invest in publicity—it’s political publicity,” Pardo says. The challenge for Pardo and his team is to fund and create top-quality critical content without becoming dependent on any particular ad buyer.

For now, Pardo and his business partner are funding their project with the money that they earn from their freelance income from jobs for external clients. It’s a business model that could eventually become consolidated under the *Liberacion* brand. Right now the company’s operating budget “comes from our money, from the money I earn and what my partners earn,” Pardo says. “We also have some

debts. We owe some contributors. But there's a lot of solidarity. We buy the content and people know we'll pay eventually. We've only sold two ads so far. [But] we think it's a noble effort."

More than just being an outlet for in-depth photojournalism stories, Pardo wants *Liberacion* to publish the sort of hard-hitting investigative and analytical news that is lacking in many of Acapulco's small newspapers. "We want to break taboos about reporting on corruption and have real quality journalism. We want to be autonomous," he says.

One of the biggest challenges, however, is the high cost associated with print. Pardo chose to do print rather than embrace a digital-only strategy out of a desire to maximize readership in a place where many people survive on low incomes and the overwhelming majority of homes lack internet access. It is a similar challenge faced by media start-ups in other parts of the country and other parts of the world. Digital news can target social media-savvy, well educated, middle and upper middle-class young people, but traditional platforms such as print and radio are necessary to access a wider segment of the population.

"Printing—that's the most expensive thing. And then the content. We pay a designer, we pay [...] for other costs. The texts, the designers, and the photos—those are ours. Most of the photos are our own, and we don't charge," Pardo says. It's a model based on self-financing that is working in the short term, but will need to be supplemented with other sources of income to become sustainable in the long term.

"We want to access the public through a weekly and tell them what's going on. We also want to do multimedia and opinion online. That's the end goal."

For now Pardo gives away the copies of *Liberacion* for free as a way to introduce the news magazine and help build up a base of readers. In the medium term he wants to start charging for the print version and look for advertisers for both the print issue and the website. "The risk is that we won't earn enough to balance out costs and that we won't have the ability to do real journalism if we want to business with the government, that's the risk. We live in a state with a lot of security complications and the press is vulnerable. That's a historical fact. I've had colleagues attacked by criminals and people say it's because of their editorial line.



So that's the line: we have to be cautious about a lot of things, but we don't want to censor ourselves," Pardo explains.

*Liberación*, a publication whose name means liberation, is still working to free itself from the budget constraints that Guerrero's traditional media face. "We want to be as independent as possible," Pardo says.





## ***RIDOCE* – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interviewed by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***Riodoce* is a successful news magazine and website that is based in the state of Sinaloa, Mexico. Founded in 2002, the magazine has established itself as one of Mexico’s most successful digital news portals and funds itself through a combination of print sales and ad revenue.**

*Riodoce* is a weekly news magazine and website based in the state of Sinaloa in northern Mexico. *Riodoce* operates in one of Mexico’s most challenging security environments. Sinaloa is home to the eponymous cartel run by infamous Mexican drug trafficker Joaquin “El Chapo” Guzman.

### **SNAPSHOT – *Riodoce***

- Operating costs of \$310,000 per year
- 2.5 to 3 million page views a month
- 47,000 Facebook followers

Although Mexico’s Federal Police and army have a heavy presence in Sinaloa, large swaths of the state’s rugged Sierra Madre mountains are considered by many security analysts to be under the de facto control of the Sinaloa trafficking organization. Sinaloa’s capital, Culiacan, is one of Mexico’s most violent cities. Sinaloa tallied nearly 1,000 murders in 2014, the fourth highest for any Mexican state.

In addition to concerns about general security, journalists in Sinaloa face unique risks. Attacks against media professionals have made some local media outlets more hesitant to publish in-depth stories about crime and security and have convinced many national and foreign outlets to avoid the state almost entirely. In 2014 Antonio Gamboa Urías, the editor of a Sinaloa-based weekly newspaper, was kidnapped and murdered. Over the past fifteen years, eight journalists have been killed in Sinaloa.

### **INNOVATIONS – *Riodoce***

- Hybrid print-digital model helps *Riodoce* maximize readership in a place where many residents lack access to the internet
- Increased attention to digital media is helping *Riodoce*’s reports on crime and security find a broader national and international audience

Despite operating in such a challenging environment, *Riodoce* has achieved widespread acclaim for its fiercely independent reporting on politics, crime, and security. Rather than simply reporting only the most basic details of different cartel-related homicides, as is common practice at other local media outlets, *Riodoce* fills the “Narcotrafico” (or “drug trafficking”) section of its website with specific references to different organized crime groups and their leaders. Founded in 2002 by veteran journalist Ismael Bojorquez and four other journalists, *Riodoce* is widely recognized as one of Mexico’s most respected independent news organizations.

The magazine sells around 2,000 copies per week and generates 2.5 to 3 million page views a month. Currently around 40 percent of *Riodoce*’s revenues come from the sale of the print edition, and 60 percent comes from ad sales. It is a unique model that has won a loyal following of readers. “There’s no other website like ours in Sinaloa,” Bojorquez says.

In addition to security problems, media companies in Sinaloa have a difficult time selling content and ads in a poor area. Nearly 70 percent of the state’s residents live in poverty or are at risk of falling into poverty based on their income levels. In this context, *Riodoce*’s success is particularly impressive. The magazine is able to generate enough income to cover costs that total \$310,000 per year. It has a long-term goal of establishing a 20 percent profit margin to provide a cushion of long-term financial security. Bojorquez says he thinks the paper’s longevity is directly tied to the quality of the journalism it publishes.

“We sell a lot of papers in a state where people don’t read the newspaper a lot. We also have success with our website. I think it’s from being a media outlet that has credibility. We are trustworthy,” he says. Although *Riodoce* has established itself as a successful digital media outlet, Bojorquez wants to compete with the new generation of digital media start-ups. “We want to do more with digital media and social networks,” he says. Currently *Riodoce* has 47,000 followers on Facebook and 8,500 on Twitter, and wants to continue to expand the company’s digital footprint.

“We don’t have any plans to jump ship. We have the idea of growing,” he says.

## ***SinEMBARGO* – Mexico (148<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interviewed by Nathaniel Parish Flannery*

***SinEmbargo* is a successful Mexico City–based digital news portal that combines original reporting with content produced by a network of op-ed contributors. Founded in 2011, *SinEmbargo* has won acclaim for its news reporting but is still working to achieve profitability.**

*SinEmbargo* is arguably Mexico’s most successful independent digital news site. Founded in 2011 by a team of veteran journalists including executive editor Jorge Zepeda and director of content Rita Varela, *SinEmbargo* has emerged as a powerful voice in Mexican politics. The site mixes opinion pieces from leading Mexican intellectuals with reported and well-researched articles from high-profile Mexican journalists. Although still not profitable, *SinEmbargo* has won the support of financial backers and liberal readers.

### **SNAPSHOT – *SinEmbargo***

- 1.1 million followers on Facebook, 608,000 on Twitter
- 5 percent of revenues from selling content to other sites, with plans to see this figure grow

In a market dominated by large media companies, *SinEmbargo* is seen as a refreshing, alternative option. Mexico’s television news market is controlled by one company, Televisa, with longstanding ties to the Institutional Revolutionary Party of the current president, Enrique Peña Nieto. Advertising from government agencies helps sustain many media companies, but also presents a conflict of interest.

Many major newspapers in Mexico often publish articles that downplay political scandals and echo government viewpoints. Although television and radio are still the dominant news platforms, digital media start-ups such as *SinEmbargo* have

### **INNOVATIONS – *SinEmbargo***

- Full commitment to digital allows the site to embrace blog-style text and YouTube video news but avoid the fixed costs of print or broadcast
- Selling content to other media outlets helps generate revenue
- Plans to create a news agency to sell more content

developed a massive following among young, internet-savvy smartphone users. Twitter and Facebook have emerged as two of the most important platforms for political debate in Mexico, and *SinEmbargo* has capitalized on this trend.

On average the site pulls in between 17 and 18 million unique visitors a month. “We’ve gotten a good response,” Varela says. “We have high-quality readers; young people, students, graduates, professionals, politicians, business people, and social leaders. It’s the cream of the crop. We have a very elite profile of readers.”

“Success is in the recognition of the public. You can see it in the stats. We had humble beginnings but now we can compete with the big media companies that have been around for 150 years,” she adds.

Carving out a unique space for critical analysis of elected officials and public policies hasn’t won *SinEmbargo* many friends in Mexico’s government. After the murder of photojournalist Ruben Espinosa in Mexico City on July 30, many investigative journalists in Mexico City feel a new sense of vulnerability. “It’s a general problem in the country. There’s no respect for the law and no respect for civil rights. The problem is that the state should respect these rights and it’s the first to violate it. We haven’t felt it directly. We feel repression from the police at marches when we’re working. There are threats, but it’s not at the same level as in Veracruz or other states where there are murders and disappearances. But the threat is there,” Varela says.

During the height of the fall 2014 protests over the disappearance of 43 student teachers from the Ayotzinapa school in Guerrero, *SinEmbargo*’s website was targeted by a sophisticated cyber attack. On a daily basis, however, the threat to *SinEmbargo*’s operations comes from the simple economics of trying to fund journalism without government backing.

*SinEmbargo*’s critical journalism has won a loyal fan base of readers but it has also scared off some advertisers. “As a critical media outlet it’s not easy to get ads. We have no ads from the government. But it still has to be a business to pay people to work. I think so—in the last few months we’ve had contact with some investors. There’s interest there. I think the editorial independence we have [can continue] but the future is starting to look clearer and less dark,” Varela says.

Despite the challenges, *SinEmbargo*'s senior editors have no plans to shift their editorial strategy. "You can't have financial success without editorial success. If people don't respect the content you can't be successful," Varela says. The editorial team at *SinEmbargo* is convinced that in the next three years they will be able to foster advertising deals with companies that are interested in promoting government transparency. They also aim to build partnerships with foreign news organizations and have no plans to sell the business.

"We want to compete with the leaders [in online news]. In this case it's [the newspaper] *El Universal* in terms of pageviews and visitors. But we still want to be independent. So our main goal is to stay on this path and keep being an option for people who don't like what they read in other outlets that are more pro-government," Varela says.

For *SinEmbargo* the biggest challenges are in fostering relationships with advertisers. "It's hard for critical media outlets [to get ads] but it's not impossible," Varela says.



## **ECO-BUSINESS – Singapore (153<sup>rd</sup>)**



*Interview by Xin Yi Cheow*

***Eco-Business* is a profit-making outlet that provides news about the environment and climate change to the business community in the Asia Pacific. The company hopes to expand to a wider audience.**

### **SNAPSHOT – *Eco-Business***

- 66,000 subscribers
- Revenues: 50% client fees for direct marketing, 20% banner advertising, 20%- client-sponsored content, 10% consultancies, events
- Started with US\$5600 from British High Commission

*Eco-Business* was founded in November 2009 as an “experiment” by Jessica Cheam, a former journalist with Singapore’s national daily, *The Straits Times*, in the lead-up to the 2009 United Nations Climate Change Conference, also known as the Copenhagen Summit.

Cheam, who was then a business reporter covering primarily property- and energy-related news, was buoyed by an Earth Journalism Award she received for a newspaper feature on how energy companies are responding to climate change. But Jessica was disappointed by what she saw as insufficient coverage of climate-change related news in the region.

“Whenever I wanted to pitch something on climate change, it was always relegated to the back pages or didn't even make the pages. That was the trigger. That was the gap I saw—that Asia is experiencing such rapid development but there was no platform reporting on these issues,” says Cheam.

### **INNOVATIONS – *Eco-Business***

- Direct marketing model monetizing database of 66,000 subscribers
- Twin strategy of building subscriber base and building content
- LinkedIn outreach to reach potential subscribers
- Weekly newsletters delivered to inbox of subscribers to maintain traffic to website
- Consultancies to help build events
- Strategy of engaging businesses rather than being adversarial
- Build up credibility through partnerships with leading NGOs in the sustainability field, including Greenpeace and deforestation experts in the region
- Having an editorial person to drive content and a business person who thinks about income: a good balance to rein in each other

Billing itself as a “leading media company serving Asia Pacific’s sustainable development, clean tech and responsible business community,” *Eco-Business* aims to build a strong and sustainable social enterprise that helps Asia Pacific’s businesses along an environmentally and socially responsible, low-carbon path, through helping businesses, governments, NGOs, think tanks to get their stories published, read by a wider audience and stimulate debate about sustainable development.

Cheam received a total of SGD\$8,000 (US\$5,600) from the British High Commission in Singapore and the Singapore Environment Council to build *Eco-Business* in 2009, and for the first six months persuaded fellow journalists to cover stories for the website pro-bono. James Hosking, her husband and now managing director of *Eco-Business*, was leaving his job at a media company and saw a business opportunity. He took over managing the website and registered it a private limited company in October 2010, hiring two employees who have since left to manage content. Cheam has served as its editorial advisor since inception, but only joined *Eco-Business* full-time in June 2013 after she quit her job at *The Straits Times*.

Other than the start-up grant, the company was entirely funded by the couple. While the outlet’s private limited status is an impediment to receiving donor funding, she felt that this was a better option than receiving foreign funds, which would mean donor restrictions under Singapore law. “If we keep it as a business and make it successful, then we have complete control over it,” she says.

After three years “of paying themselves a salary,” the business turned profitable in 2014, growing revenue 85 percent each year. The company now has six full-time staff: four editorial, two sales and two part-time staff in human resources and web development. Staff costs make up 90 percent of its expenditures, with the rest spent renting an office and paying for web development.

Cheam credited the publication’s current profitability to a twin strategy of building a strong subscriber base of readers and crafting quality content to reach these readers. Nearly half of the site’s current revenue comes from fees it collects from between 50 to 100 clients—made up of 70 percent corporate entities and 30

percent government agencies—for direct marketing to its 66,000-strong subscriber database.

*Eco-Business* sends out two mailings a week. One is a newsletter in which clients appear for a small fee. “But much more powerful is that they pay us to send their own flyer only about their event—the Asia Clean Energy Summit or CSR Asia Summit or similar—that looks like it could come from them, but actually we send them out. They can’t because they don’t have the subscriber database. You can make hundreds of thousands of dollars every year sending [electronic mailers] on behalf of clients,” says Hosking.

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**“You can make hundreds of thousands of dollars every year sending [electronic mailers] on behalf of clients.”**

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- James Hosking,  
Managing Director

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Building the database means attracting readers and securing their loyalty through editorial content from their website. The site currently has 80,000 monthly visitors. In the early years, Cheam says that Hosking would build their database by “manually adding people on LinkedIn.” LinkedIn was itself a platform that *Eco-Business* used to post their stories and generate discussion.

“We have a sign-up button for the newsletter, and our own interactions with newsmakers, NGOs, and policymakers. When we meet them, we say, ‘we’ll like to add you.’ And they would say, ‘sure, we would love to receive it.’ These are all senior policy makers and business leaders. Our clients find it valuable to get to this audience,” says Cheam.

Maintaining readers’ loyalty depended on the weekly newsletter, which Cheam changed from a monthly to weekly in 2013. “We realized a monthly newsletter does not gain reader penetration. People don’t remember it. Changing to weekly helped tremendously. News get delivered to their inbox, readers think it’s interesting, they click, it goes to the website, the website generates traffic, that traffic feeds on to advertisers.”

Banner advertising currently makes up about 20 percent of their revenue, although she says that as a proportion of revenue, along with click-through rates, it is falling—reflecting what she sees as an industry-wide trend. The other 20 percent comes from sponsored series, where clients pay to write a profile on a



business or topic to generate publicity. *Eco-Business* is increasingly diversifying into “client-driven content consultancy,” which has so far accounted for 10 percent of the year’s revenue. *Eco-Business* helps clients such as Ricoh and Temasek Holdings organize high-level conferences and panel discussion on topics related to sustainability, providing services including agenda setting, topic setting and inviting relevant speakers.

Asked about maintaining journalism independence and integrity given the nature of her business model and working relationship with corporates, Cheam acknowledged this was an issue. She said that she has turned down clients which she felt “have not upheld standards of sustainability.”

“Every single client we work with we screen beforehand to ensure they are doing what they say and it’s not just green washing; that they can prove to us that their claims are real and they have made progress. I think the whole idea of excluding business is naive thinking because whether we like it or not, the world runs because businesses run the world. Everything we do day to day involves business, whether it is a product or service. So our philosophy is always to engage rather than exclude. Only by engaging them can you change things,” she says.

As an example of website’s lack of concern for ruffling feathers, she cited a story that *Eco-Business* published on how government regulation could affect the development of Singapore’s solar industry. Although the story resulted in some pressure from the government department issuing the regulation—“We were called by the Singapore Civil Defense Force”—Cheam said that the website held its ground. Months later, she heard that there would be changes to the regulation.

The company, however, does not have set guidelines on engagement with businesses, with everything decided on a case-by-case basis. In general, it screens for their business and reputation (including whether the prospective client has been “scandal-ridden”).

Cheam says that she is positioning *Eco-Business* as a serious publication analyzing current news and trends in a business context. It has 11 “verticals”—topics ranging from green buildings and corporate social responsibility to eco-cities. While its current readers primarily come from the business community, *Eco-*

*Business* hopes to win greater mass readership by appealing to the lay reader, helping to break its stagnating monthly figure of around 80,000 unique visitors.

*Eco-Business* is revamping its website this October, and Cheam hopes to publish “fun” stories to generate clicks as well as in-depth features on how climate change impacts food security or migration. Still, she noted that these stories are “luxuries” and need to be balanced against labor-intensive stories and sponsored content that “pay the wages.”

While she is keen to embark on investigative exposés, she noted the difficulties of doing so in Singapore. “If we are stationed in Bangkok, where it is edgier and more developing, we would have more fodder. But we don't have the resources to commission a writer. If someone comes to me with an idea, and it's really good, I will commission it. But who is going to pay my writers here to fly overseas and interview people? It's not something I can justify when we are such a small team and revenues are stabilizing,” she says.

# MADA MASR – Egypt (158<sup>th</sup>)



Interview by Kristen Grennan

***Mada Masr* is an independent media website based in Cairo, Egypt. Despite a tense environment that puts pressure on media, *Mada Masr* has been able to survive and reach young Egyptians.**

*Mada Masr* is a news website based in Cairo that tries to keep independent media alive in Egypt, despite government pressure. The organization was founded in 2013 by 23 journalists who had been laid off from the *Egypt Independent*, the sister English-language publication of *Al-Masry Al-Youm* daily<sup>106</sup> and the country's flagship independent paper, when the *Independent* closed its doors due to financial and political pressures.<sup>107</sup>

## SNAPSHOT – *Mada Masr*

- 80% of revenue from donor funding
- Staff: 30 full-time, 40 freelance
- Facebook: 28,856 followers
- Twitter: 28,300 followers

Such pressures make it difficult for independent media outlets like *Mada Masr* to survive. According to founder and current Editor in Chief Lina Attalah, “we founded *Mada Masr* to preserve the practice of independent media at a time when journalism structures were becoming increasingly scarce.”

## INNOVATIONS – *Mada Masr*

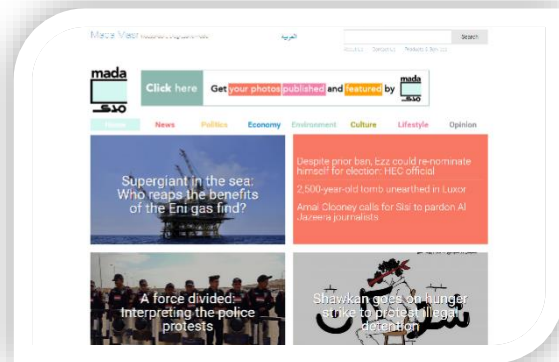
- Credibility earned through transparency of editorial and reporting process
- Avoid anchor investors in favor of diversifying income across many smaller investors
- Majority of traffic sourced through Facebook referrals
- Government repression and regulation of press freedom increases demand and support for credible independent media

<sup>106</sup> “About Egypt Independent.” *Egypt Independent*. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/about>. Accessed: 8/16/15.

<sup>107</sup> Evans, Angela. November 26, 2014. *The Sheet*. <http://thesheetnews.com/2014/11/26/mada-masr-a-new-approach-to-journalism-in-egypt/>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

The founders of the site are quite young, averaging about 25 years old,<sup>108</sup> and so is the readership. The site covers Egyptian news, politics, economy, environment, culture, and lifestyle, though the most regular and steady flow of articles comes from the news section. It publishes in both English and Arabic. *Mada Masr* employs 30 full-time salaried staff and has a roster of about 40 freelancers who are paid by the article.

In its first year, *Mada Masr* was mostly funded through non-profit grants.<sup>109</sup> Today, grants from international organizations (such as Denmark's International Media Support and Germany's Rosa Luxemburg Foundation<sup>110</sup>) account for about 80% of the funding. The outlet is seeking investors, while avoiding anchor investors and pursuing a number of smaller investments. Attalah explained the need to "move away from anchor investors" by saying that they "can pull the plug at any minute or influence the editorial policy of our coverage."<sup>111</sup>



Additionally, about 15-17% of additional funding comes from other sources: a daily press review that readers can subscribe to, editorial services, research and translation, advertisement, and events. In order to protect *Mada Masr*'s editorial independence, its founders hope to continue to diversify these revenue streams. Ultimately, for Attalah, financial success for the organization would mean "having enough revenue generation to cover our needs."

Investigative journalism is a priority. According to Attalah, "we are trying to restore the process of journalistic integrity because it's shuttered elsewhere [in Egypt]." In fact, Egypt's imprisonment of journalists is at an all-time high, with Egyptian authorities holding at least 18 journalists behind bars in relation to their

<sup>108</sup> Chang, Leslie T. January 27, 2015. "The News Website That's Keeping Press Freedom Alive in Egypt." *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/jan/27/-sp-online-newspaper-keeping-press-freedom-alive-egypt>. Accessed: 8/17/15.

<sup>109</sup> *Mada Masr*. "About Us." <http://www.madamasr.com/about-us>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

<sup>110</sup> Chang, "The News Website That's Keeping Press Freedom Alive in Egypt."

<sup>111</sup> *Mada Masr*. "About Us."

reporting.<sup>112</sup> The threat of closure and arrests for *Mada Masr* and other news sites is real: gag orders have been issued on sensitive topics, and entire outlets, such as *Al Jazeera* and the Turkish *Anadolu Agency*, have been banned from the country.<sup>113</sup> “We have a lot of challenges given the political environment,” Attalah says. “We are in constant danger. ... It definitely affects sustainability and security.”

Even so, *Mada Masr* is not giving up on its goals and interest in independent media. “We are here to question it and engage [the political environment]; we are here to think about it and to talk about it,” Attalah says. *Mada Masr*’s editorial team meets weekly to discuss coverage and objectivity. According to Amira Salah-Ahmed, the site’s general manager, “our credibility comes from being totally transparent about our editorial process and how we report our stories.”<sup>114</sup>

The technology environment in Egypt supports an online outlet such as *Mada Masr*. Internet penetration is “slowly reaching 50 percent... so that puts us in a privileged space,” says Attalah. With a target audience of youth, who are mostly active online, “We’re reaching the audience we need to by being online.” The majority of *Mada Masr*’s traffic comes from Facebook, reflecting its huge local popularity. (Facebook was the country’s most visited website in 2015.<sup>115</sup>) The internet has helped *Mada Masr* to remain in touch with other online news outlets in the Arab world: “We were constantly exchanging ideas with other media outlets... We knew about them from their activism and online engagement.”

Attalah hopes to continue to expand the news site and make it more sustainable, expand storytelling practices, and acquire a global base of readers. However, Attalah notes, “it’s hard to talk about optimism considering the environment. It would be an achievement to stay alive for three to five years.”

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<sup>112</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists. 2015. “Egypt’s imprisonment of journalists is at an all-time high.” June 25. <https://cpj.org/reports/2015/06/egypt-imprisonment-of-journalists-is-at-an-all-time-high.php>. Accessed July 22, 2015.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Frenkel, Sheera. March 21, 2015. “Meet One of Egypt’s Only Independent News Sites.” *BuzzFeed News*. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/meet-one-of-egypts-only-independent-news-sites#.bpYvIQbR>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

<sup>115</sup> Alexa. “Top Sites in Egypt.” <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/EG>. Accessed: 8/17/2015.

## **GUOKR – China (176<sup>th</sup>)**



*Interview by Kristen Grennan and Joyce Minjie Zhao*

**Guokr is a media and education company in China that brings science and technology news and information to the masses via website and mobile app.**

In July 2015, *Guokr* was divided into two departments: *Guokr Media* and *Guokr Education* (both departments still share administrative, financial, and human resources).<sup>116</sup>

*Guokr Media* focuses on interviewing scientist and writing popular science articles, while *Guokr Education* hosts an online community for massive open online classes (or MOOCs), organizes seminars, and generates other educational products.<sup>117</sup> *Guokr* uses professionally generated content curated by its editors (and published by *Guokr Media*), user-generated content from knowledgeable users, and offline seminars held by *Guokr*, which invite specialists in various fields to share their expertise.<sup>118</sup> The success of user-generated content in particular creates a high level of engagement and serves as a common web hangout spot, leading many people to consider *Guokr* a social networking site.<sup>119</sup>

### **SNAPSHOT - *Guokr***

- Operating costs: \$3.2 million
- 11 million followers on Chinese social media
- 150 full-time staff members, 40 editors, 1500 writers

With all of its products and brands together, *Guokr* has become one of the most widely recognized science and technology media resources in China. Additionally,

### **INNOVATIONS – *Guokr***

- Science content generated by knowledgeable users, curated by editors
- Offline seminars invite specialists in various fields to share expertise, build publication's brand and credibility
- Corporate sponsored articles published on separate page, social media

<sup>116</sup> Whenever possible, the departments will be referred to specifically.

<sup>117</sup> Liu, Yang. Email correspondence. July 13, 2015.

<sup>118</sup> Lee, Emma. December 22, 2014. "Science Networking Service Guokr Secures US\$20M Series C Funding." *Technode*. <http://technode.com/2014/12/22/guokr-funding-tal/>. Accessed: 8/16/2015.

<sup>119</sup> For example, see: Lee, "Science Networking Service"; PR Newswire, December 21, 2014, "TAL Education Group Takes Strategic Stake in Guokr," <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/tal-education-group-takes-strategic-stake-in-guokr-300012901.html>, accessed: 8/16/2015.

*Guokr Media* Editor in Chief Ou Wu notes that although *Guokr*'s brand has expanded and diversified, "the core is always science communication."

*Guokr* was founded in 2010 by Ji Xiaohua (or Ji Shisan), who earlier blogged as a biology PhD student<sup>120</sup> and started a non-profit science forum in 2008 called Songshuhui (or "squirrel group"), which relied on volunteers interested in writing science articles in their spare time. While the non-profit organization still exists today, in 2010, Xiaohua and four other founders decided to create a sustainable, for-profit science and technology media enterprise. At the time, they did not base its model on any other site, and *Guokr* is still considered to be unique in China. Today, *Guokr Media* has grown to 1,500 writers, 40 editors, and 150 full-time staff members, and has produced 12,000 articles.

The outlet has become extremely popular in China, with 10 million followers on Weibo,<sup>121</sup> 1.3 million followers on Weixin,<sup>122</sup> 3.5 million app users, and 3 million registered users to the *Guokr* website. According to Wu, "we constantly use new technology and channels to spread science knowledge."

China has one of the largest and fastest growing online populations, accounting for nearly 20% of all internet users in the world.<sup>123</sup> It has 649 million internet users, 80% of which go online using smartphones and tablets.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, 52.1% of Chinese people still do not have internet access.<sup>125</sup> Wu pointed out that "internet development in China hugely influences *Guokr*. We have to make full use of the connectivity and new technology. The rise of new media has influenced communication and therefore demands technological development. Innovation in internet companies pushes us to increase our presence in social media and develop new projects."

Since *Guokr*'s founding, its goal has been to, "become the best science and technology media," Wu said. Due to the website's growing fan base and its goal of educating the public, the Chinese government has hired *Guokr* for several public projects. According to Wu, "the government sees our science articles as useful to

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<sup>120</sup> Social Tech. May 9, 2015. "Guokr.com." <http://socialtech.org.uk/projects/guokr-com/>. Accessed: 8/16/2015.

<sup>121</sup> A Chinese social media platform.

<sup>122</sup> A Chinese social media platform.

<sup>123</sup> McKirdy, Euan. "China's Online Users More Than Double Entire US Population." *CNN*. 4 February 2015. Accessed: 7 August 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/02/03/world/china-internet-growth-2014/>.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

their goal of popularizing science. Therefore, we provided content to their community educational projects.” Since 2014, *Guokr* has been hired by the Chinese government to work on two or three projects. Because *Guokr* is a private company, Wu noted that the government does not influence its content.

As well as government projects, *Guokr* works with private companies to improve their scientific communications for public relations and corporate social responsibility purposes. For example, GE hired *Guokr* to write articles on renewable energy, and Tetra Packs commissioned it to write articles on recycling. These articles may be published on the company’s website, “groups” page, and on *Guokr*’s social media pages.<sup>126</sup> Projects such as these are valuable because the website does not host advertising or receive grants. *Guokr* also relies on venture capital funding; it has received investments from angel investors and has gone through three rounds of investing. The current fixed costs for running the organization are 20 million Yuan (approximately \$3.2 million), and the budget is currently balanced thanks to these profits and investments.

This variety of funding and revenue reflects *Guokr*’s priority to remain sustainable. According to Wu, “there are many indicators and dimensions of success. We want to improve Chinese scientific literacy, but we need sustainable development. Business success is our drive and fuel for sustainable development.”

Ensuring that the mission of the organization is supplemented by strong, revenue-generating business practices seems to be a method that is working well for *Guokr*. Wu is quite optimistic about the future of the organization, pointing out that the founders have not discussed an exit strategy. According to Wu, “of course we want *Guokr* to last forever. The exit strategy could be going public in a few years. There will always be a spiritual need for scientific literacy.”

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<sup>126</sup> Email correspondence between Tianyu Lei, editor at *Guokr*, and Kristen Grennan on 8/27/2015.