EDITION DW AKADEMIE | 2021

Safe. Strong. Viable.

The symbiosis between media safety and media viability.

DW Akademie

Made for minds.

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RESPONSIBLE
Carsten von Nahmen
Jan Lublinski

EDITORS
Laura Moore
Petra Aldenrath
Nadine Jurrat

AUTHORS
Petra Aldenrath
Elisabet Cantenys
Nadine Hoffman
Nadine Jurrat
Daniel Moßbrucker
Elisa Lees Muñoz

LAYOUT
Jorge Loureiro

ILLUSTRATION
Marc Löricke

PROOFREADING
Jackie Wilson

Contents

Introduction

No media viability without media safety

By **Petra Aldenrath** and **Nadine Jurrat**

At DW Akademie, we regard strong media organizations that produce quality content—whether commercial media, nonprofit newsrooms or community media—as an essential pillar of democracy. This is why one of the focal areas of our work is media viability—the ability of media to produce high quality journalism in a sustainable way. Media outlets can play an essential role in sorting facts from fiction, offering a platform for diverse opinions and moderating discussions. Media outlets that report independently and provide people with reliable information are indispensable for any open society.

However, public interest media outlets have been under threat—not just from those who do not want a free, critical press but also economically, due to changes in the market that demand much more creative ways of generating income for a sustainable media business model. Internationally, there have been huge efforts to improve the safety of journalists and the legal frameworks in which media workers operate. But the more we at DW Akademie understand about the different elements of media viability, the more we see the symbiosis between media safety and media viability.

Media safety has long been a concern around the world, with the number of journalists attacked, imprisoned or indeed killed at a constant high for decades now. On top of this, digital threats are increasing, and media outlets have been struggling to find answers to digital challenges and changing user habits that are affecting the overall business model and hence labor security for many media workers.

And then came COVID-19: the pandemic and its effects on economic, social and political environments has created an alarming situation for media organizations in countries all over the world, with governments cracking down on freedom of expression and attacking those who report critically on government measures.

The DW Akademie Media Viability Approach in a nutshell

- Media viability is the ability of media outlets and media landscapes to produce high quality journalism in a sustainable way. DW Akademie's media viability model centers around the media users having access to reliable, independent information.
- Media viability is crucial for citizens to have stable access to reliable information.
- It's not only about media organizations, but also about networks and the overall environment.
- It comprises much more than money and income sources: Aspects such as audience engagement, flexible business models, reliable journalistic content, capacity building and collaborations also play a crucial role for any business strategy, as does media safety.
- The enabling environment is essential, including the legal framework, the economic environment including buying power of the audiences and an equitable advertising market, as well as journalism training institutions and professional associations.
- Media viability is about finding a stable balance between the aspects of politics and economics, the community, technology and content.

Reliable information is especially essential in crisis situations — as COVID-19 has shown — and media outlets carry the heavy responsibility of providing balanced news, exposing abuse of power and corruption, and countering disinformation. Paradoxically, crises make it especially difficult for media to provide their audiences with relevant and balanced information whilst keeping their employees safe and maintaining their financial stability. Media professionals are targeted, media freedom is restricted, (self-) censorship increases and income sources break away.

We asked journalists, media founders and managers from the Philippines, Mexico, Lebanon, and Burkina Faso this question: Do you see a direct link between producing quality content, engaging the audience and generating income from diverse sources, and the safety of your staff and media as a whole? Or alternatively: Do you believe that media outlets are more viable thanks to a holistic approach to safety and security, including digital and physical security, as well as ensuring that staff and freelancers have labor security?

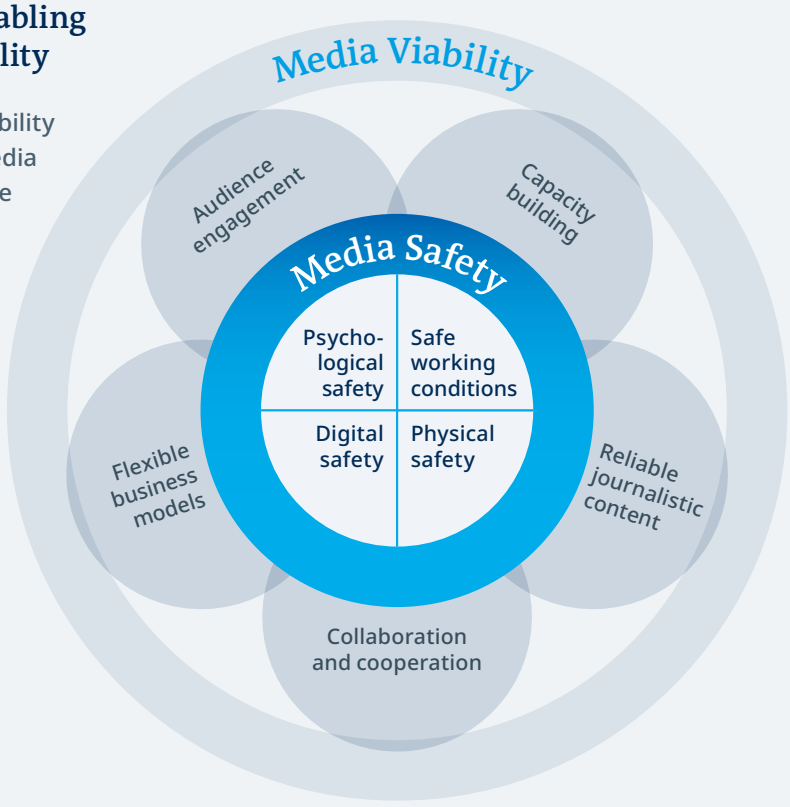
Their answers do not only point to individual cases of threatened journalists but rather to a problem at the organizational level. They show that media houses and media organizations that think broadly about security issues from the beginning, establish a safety culture, relate closely to their audience, and provide high quality and balanced journalism are both more resilient and more protected against external attacks. Media outlets that understand the legal and economic environment they are operating in, that know their strengths and also their audience and can set up and adapt their business model in a more flexible way, also have the best preconditions to stay viable. In this publication, experts in matters of newsroom safety, digital security and safety for women and minority groups provide the necessary context and give practical examples and advice.

The experiences shared in this publication clearly illustrate the connection between these viability aspects and how they mutually enhance one another — creating interdependence between the safety and security of journalists, access to information and freedom of expression for the general public.

Of course, training individual journalists to stay safe — online and offline — and ensuring that those who attack anyone defending freedom of expression and access to information are brought to justice continue to be essential elements for journalism safety. Through the examples in this publication, we want to add a new perspective to the discussion. Showing that there is no viability without safety, the aim is to convince more people — especially media owners and managers — to get on board, so that we can find new approaches to this very complex problem that affects us all.

Media safety — an enabling factor for media viability

Media safety and media viability are strongly interlinked. Media safety plays an enabling role for media viability.



The holistic approach

Credibility and independence are the ultimate measures of viability and safety

The Philippines is one of the deadliest countries for journalists in South East Asia. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the country belongs to the five countries with highest impunity rates for crimes against journalists. Since Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, violence in the Philippines has increased dramatically. More than 5,000 people were killed in Duterte's proclaimed war on drugs within the first two years of his presidency alone. President Duterte is also known for his hate towards the media, stating shortly after his inauguration that some of the many journalists killed in the country had deserved to die. Despite this environment and despite being under constant attack, Rappler, the first online-only news organization in the Philippines, became an internationally recognized and award-winning media site.

DW Akademie spoke to three of Rappler's founding members, Chief Executive Officer **Maria Ressa**, Executive Editor **Glenda Gloria** and Managing Editor **Chay Hofileña**, about the importance of focusing on a young, digitally native audience and of founding your media outlet based on a holistic safety approach.

Interviews by **Petra Aldenrath** and **Nadine Jurrat**

Rappler has been under permanent attack — offline and online. Your office has been searched, National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) agents entered your premises in Manila armed with an arrest warrant. Is there anything you can do to prevent escalations?

Maria Ressa: I am a planner. You prepare for the worst and you hope for the best. Embrace your fear. Shine the light — and tell the world. What is happening to us is emblematic of how journalists around the world are being attacked: bottom-up exponential attacks on social media eroding trust, seeding lies that make us more vulnerable. That's followed by top-down attacks by President Duterte himself and the weaponization of the law: eleven cases filed against me and Rappler in 2018; ten arrest warrants issued against me in less than two years. On June 15, 2020, former researcher Rey Santos Jr and I were convicted for cyber libel — for a crime that didn't exist when we published a story eight years earlier that I didn't write, edit, or supervise. This Kafkaesque move can send each of us to jail for up to six years. I was convicted for a crime that didn't exist and a story I didn't write, edit or supervise.

Chay Hofileña: Maria and Rey Santos Jr are not in jail because this is a bailable offense and the case remains pending with the Court of Appeals.

After the arrest warrant was hurled at us there was a lot of international support but no strong outburst from the local media. In summer 2020, ABS-CBN, the country's largest network, was closed down by this administration. This decision in the middle of a pandemic shows the shamelessly skewed priorities of this government. When media operations are closed down on account of twisted facts and an inability to accept criticism, democracy's death is hastened.

In the Philippines, both online and offline, our world is ruled by violence and this violence leads to fear. When the government attacks, you make a decision: Are we going to pursue hard-hitting investigative reports against a vindictive government or are we going to duck and wait it out? Well, you can't wait this out. It's really about courage. Investigative stories require courage in any environment, but even more so in this environment, where you have a president openly saying that journalists are corrupt, and a government inviting violence.

Democracy is under threat in this country; the media should be pushing back but we're not seeing enough of that. We can understand because other media could be facing the same consequences. All Duterte needs to do is to hit them publicly.

Rappler soon became the platform of the millennials, with the majority of the readers being between 18–34 years old. How important is a strong connection to the audience for your success?

Maria Ressa: It's incredibly important. We build a community because we stand by our principles: the standards and ethics, the mission of journalism, which the world needs today more than ever. When social media, the world's largest

distributor of news, become behaviour modification systems that spread lies faster than facts by design, journalists fight for facts. We have to become activists in a battle for facts, for truth, for democracy. Our audience trusts us because we stand by our principles despite great personal cost. Our largest audience are people from the age-group of 18–34. This is part of the reason President Duterte targeted us. Like Rappler, they're young, scrappy. They know how to have fun, but they care about the same enduring values we do.

> “ Our audience trusts us because we stand by our principles despite great personal cost.

Glenda Gloria: We're in touch with our readers, know what they want and how much they can take. After our analysis showed that the readers were just skimming through lengthy articles, we turned to series-led investigations and increasingly to video.

It's a chicken and egg thing. The sceptics were discouraging us from pursuing longform because they felt like it would not take off online. But the market will never be ready for anything unless you try it. I mean, in the same manner the market wasn't ready for something like Rappler. But as journalists, we have perennial faith in the reader. That ultimately, the reader will choose quality journalism.

Chay Hofileña: Rappler was successful with the adjustments it made. Readers were loyal, and our stories also led to a changed and broadened perspective among the Filipino public about their President's dealings.

Since Rappler was founded, you have built a newsroom of more than 100 staffers — most of them young and mostly female. Why this approach?

Chay Hofileña: We're building for the future. When we started, we hired reporters as young as 23, fresh out of college or with just a few years work experience. They were very open, willing to learn and had no bad habits. And it was easy to train them. Now they're encouraged and empowered to do these stories. We have a section called “Nation” which essentially covers national news, with about 10 reporters who are encouraged to do longform stories too, including investigative or in-depth stories. The pandemic has, however, made it much more difficult to produce as many investigative reports as we may have wanted.

Glenda Gloria: The assumption here is if you're a reporter at Rappler, you have the capacity or the potential to become an investigative reporter. Reporters are told right at the start that they will have to do breaking day-to-day reports and produce in-depth investigative stories, because that is Rappler's branding. Our young reporters find personal fulfilment in doing so.

How do you protect your journalists?

Maria Ressa: Online violence leads to real world violence. Research has proven that globally. The amount of hate and violence, the dehumanization we were being subjected to on social media worried me, and when Duterte supporters came to our office and doxxed us, published our address, asked their supporters to attack us, we increased our security. We offered counselling to our reporters and social media team, among the

INFOBOX

The Philippines

The Philippine media system has long been described as the 'freest' in Asia and enjoys greater independence compared to some of the neighboring countries. But since the election of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2016, violence has increased and verbal and legal attacks on independent media have become common. The Philippines now ranks 136 out of 180 in Reporters without Borders' World Press Freedom Index. Several journalists and media companies known for their critical reporting are currently facing charges filed by high-profile state functionaries and government agencies. Over 150 incidents of threats and attacks against journalists have been recorded since Duterte assumed office. Nine journalists have been killed. A widespread 'culture of impunity' means that the vast majority of crimes against journalists remain unresolved. In addition to these threats and to precarious working conditions, according to the Digital News Report 2020 Filipino journalists struggle with one of the lowest levels of audience trust worldwide, cemented by the regime's public defamation of mainstream media.

Rappler is today's leading and first online-only news website in the Philippines. Its stories aim to provide perspective and to inspire community engagement, smart conversations, and action for social change. Since 2017, several judicial charges have been filed against Rappler, and the outlet's perseverance in upholding its right to freedom of expression have gained it international attention. The government tried to revoke Rappler's operating license, and its reporters have been banned from covering all presidential events in and outside the country.

first globally to recognize this new personal weapon against journalists. We focused on digital security, not just for our site, which has always been a priority but also for each Rappler.

Glenda Gloria: We're also asked to sweep the office for bugs every now and then. We don't talk about sensitive issues and there's no fixed equipment here. All employees bring in laptops that can be quickly packed up.

What about psychological side effects from reporting?

Chay Hofileña: After doing stories about the war on drugs, some, not all of our reporters had been having nightmares. We connected them to someone who could help. The trauma of journalists who cover violence and dead bodies is different from the trauma of others who go through similar challenges. Journalists are trained to bury their trauma and fears, and soldier on for the sake of their stories and the public they have sworn to serve. Not many psychiatrists know how to deal with tough and sceptical, if not cynical, journalists and draw them out.

Glenda Gloria: Counselling is not commonly offered here for journalists who find themselves in an area of trauma. This type of counselling, trauma reporting, is a new field in the Philippines.

> "We need to bring back principles that empower democracy: we must have a shared reality and shared facts.

How has the pandemic influenced your safety situation?

Chay Hofileña: The pandemic has made our work much more difficult. It's harder to reach out to sources who have sensitive information to share. Gadgets and communication channels are presumed to be unsafe and therefore it takes longer to gather information. It's not as easy to set face-to-face appointments because of quarantine restrictions. And we don't want to risk putting our sources' lives in danger, too. Add to the pandemic our new anti-terror law that makes it easy to justify surveillance by state actors. The pandemic has empowered the Duterte administration and legitimized human rights abuses and possible surveillance in the guise of contact-tracing for the pandemic. This has made not just journalists, but also government critics, more vulnerable to attacks both physically and virtually.

Did you expect to be attacked digitally?

Chay Hofileña: When we started, we never imagined there would be threats against our journalists. Social media held a lot of promise. The slogan we had then was "social media for social change" or "social media for social good." We never imagined social media would be a source of intimidation and harassment. We learned our lessons the hard way and learned to anticipate the worst that could happen in any situation and prepare accordingly. We fine-tuned processes and protocols along the way, depending on the levels of threat we perceived.

Maria Ressa: We lived through this technology. We embraced it for better or for worse. That's also why we were attacked. I believed in social media, because it is incredibly empowering. The network effect is incredible. When you live in the world of data the way that we do, you understand the way the world works in a whole different way. We haven't lost the wonder of the Internet, but American biologist E. O. Wilson said it best: The biggest crisis we are facing is the combination of palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and god-like technology. When technology companies took over as gatekeepers, they abdicated responsibility for protecting the public sphere. We need to bring back principles that empower democracy: we must have a shared reality and shared facts. We prioritize three existential battles: truth, climate, health.

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Maria Ressa
President and CEO of Rappler and internationally recognized as a fighter for press freedom. Prior to co-founding Rappler, she focused on investigating terrorism in Southeast Asia. In 2018, she was named one of TIME Magazine's Persons of the Year and in 2020, one of the Magazine's "100 Women of the Year", a list of the most influential women of the past century. In November 2019, she was arrested for "cyberlibel" after Rappler was accused of publishing a false news story; seven months later, a court in Manila found her guilty. Her arrest was perceived by international media and the opposition as a politically motivated attempt to silence her, as she is an outspoken critic of the current Philippine administration. In 2020, she was charged with cyberlibel again, this time for re-tweeting a screenshot of an article.

Rappler has been targeted with hate messages, especially after you published a three-part series in October 2016 on what later became known as 'patriotic trolling'—online hate speech sponsored by the State to silence anyone who was not in line with the government's official version of events. Maria alone received hundreds of messages, ranging from threats of rape to ridiculing her looks. What did you do?

Maria Ressa: I saw exponential attacks—an average of 90 hate messages per hour. So, we built Sharktank, our own database of public Facebook posts and pages—to figure out what was going on. Because how else do you know whether it is a troll, or paid, or a real person that you are engaging or responding to? When we pulled together the data for network mapping, we saw a consistent, organized propaganda machine that was feeding half-truths and manipulating Filipinos, attacking journalists, human rights activists, anyone questioning the Duterte administration. It accomplished two things: pounding the questions into silence; and seeding meta-narratives, lies that became facts. Our data showed government officials and government accounts attacking critics, connecting fake accounts, insidiously manipulating the public. The Facebook takedowns showed this abuse of power.

> "Our data showed government officials and government accounts attacking critics, connecting fake accounts, insidiously manipulating the public.

You identified numerous Facebook accounts, reaching more than three million users, that were spreading false news and inciting violence. Instead of turning your back on Facebook, in 2018 you started engaging with them and joined forces to expose fake accounts controlled by a network of Duterte supporters. Why?

Maria Ressa: In the Global South, every day that YouTube or Facebook doesn't act, somebody dies. That's the impact of this technology. Globally, democracy has been rolled back by cheap armies on social media. Technology companies handle the algorithms that now power our lives. The technology has been weaponized by authoritarian-style leaders with the willing consent of the guys who built it.

Together with the independent Filipino non-profit media organization Vera Files, in 2018 we reviewed news stories on Facebook, checked their facts, and rated their accuracy, aiming to identify and prevent disinformation from spreading on the platform. I think change is starting to happen and we're part of those discussions. That's what's exciting because I think everything we do matters now. And that's really empowering.

We're not just fighting a government. We're trying to use technology in a way that can help preserve democracy. If the bad guys can use it, why can't we use these networks as a force for good?

© Rappler

Chay Hofileña
Managing Editor and co-founder, previously headed Rappler's Investigative Desk and is in charge of Rappler's training program. Before joining Rappler, she co-founded Newsbreak Magazine and was a contributing writer. She has written on media issues and authored the book *News for Sale: The Corruption and Commercialization of the Philippine Media* (2004), published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. Chay Hofileña also teaches News Writing and Investigative Journalism to undergraduate students. She is drawn to journalism because it allows her to write stories that have the potential to make a difference.

How has Rappler managed to become a viable media company amidst these difficult circumstances?

Maria Ressa: I know that independence is connected to business and if you make business the top priority then you will not make investigative journalism your top priority. Those two things almost don't go hand in hand when you are trying to hold power to account. But in Rappler, journalists handle the business, and we've found innovative ways to turn journalistic processes and thinking into products that other companies can use.

Glenda Gloria: We have a broad approach. Our media organization relies on revenue from advertising, grants, providing data insight, and membership. In the past years, Rappler has diversified its business model in such a way that it no longer solely relies on one revenue stream such as advertising. Moreover, there is a Chinese wall between journalistic operations and business services, such as offering PR videos to commercial clients. In 2016 we hit near breakeven financially. That was the same year that we came under attack by the Duterte government.

In 2018, the Committee to Protect Journalists named Rappler its first beneficiary of a fundraising campaign to provide legal support for journalists facing extensive legal battles meant to

suppress critical journalism. The International Center for Journalists and Reporters Without Borders have also pledged their support. This is important—financially, morally, and in terms of security. It sends a signal that the government can't bankrupt us.

The majority of Rappler Holdings is owned by journalists. Investors can buy shares, but internal rules ensure that the existing shareholders have first dibs at buying those shares. Assuming one shareholder decides to sell his share, existing shareholders have the right of first refusal. Should an outsider be interested in buying shares, a majority of shareholders must approve. Equally, you cannot sell your shares without the approval of the others. Long-time Rappler employees have also been offered a stock option.

Does your audience support you financially?

Glenda Gloria: We've received financial support via our crowdfunding efforts for Maria's legal defence fund, as well as help from international human rights lawyers led by Amal Clooney. Very important is that the business model has to constantly evolve to better understand our readers. They're staying longer on the site based on the data we have. We're not a mass-market news organization so we know that they come to Rappler because of the brand of Rappler and that's the kind of readership that we want.

> "(...) we have been turning the pressure into new opportunities. If our content were trash, if our reporting was irresponsible, if we did not dare speak truth to power, if we were political partisans, there would be no credibility to speak of.

Chay Hofileña: We launched a new platform, which we call Lighthouse, right in the middle of the pandemic and we thought it was a crazy thing to do, considering that so many things could go wrong. Lighthouse is our new content delivery and community engagement platform. Our new platform was designed with users in mind who mostly visit Rappler from their mobile phones. So, we designed Lighthouse for mobile-first with an optimized architecture which enables faster loading, taking into account slower connections as well. It took months to clean up bugs and it's still work in progress. This is part of the Rappler way of innovating and experimenting, exploring what technology can make possible.

How does quality journalism contribute to staying safe and viable?

Chay Hofileña: I am certain that high-quality investigative reports, checking on abuses of power by the government, as well as breaking exclusives lie at the heart of our success. Ironically, it's Duterte's attacks that have given us an enhanced global profile and we have been turning the pressure into new opportunities. If our content were trash, if our reporting was irresponsible, if we did not dare speak truth to power, if we were political partisans, there would be no credibility to speak of. We know that in journalism, credibility is a major currency. Our output and our stories are proof of our independence. In journalism, credibility and independence are the ultimate measures of viability and safety.

Glenda Gloria: Since the colonial years, the Philippine media have played a critical role in either bringing down a dictatorship or the transitioning of a new one. Duterte underestimates the nature of the Philippine media. Rappler is led by women who were products of the revolution. We left college when Ferdinand Marcos was ousted so we benefited from political freedoms that came about after the end of that dictatorship. And we know how to lose it—so we're not going to. Especially in a country like the Philippines, quality media holds an important role: In a country with weak political institutions, a weak judiciary, you need a watchdog to speak the truth.

© Rappler

Glenda Gloria
Executive Editor, previously worked for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, The Manila Times and for international news agencies. Revolutions and transitions in the Philippines made her a fighter for freedom and shaped her temperament as a journalist. She was also a fellow at the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. She co-founded the Philippines' top investigative magazine Newsbreak, which started as a news weekly. From 2008 to January 2011, she managed ANC, the ABS-CBN News Channel as its chief operating officer. Glenda is the author of several books, including *Under the Crescent Moon: Rebellion in Mindanao* (2000), that won her the National Book Award in the Philippines.

You want viability? You need a culture of safety!

Over the last several years, killings, imprisonments and abductions of journalists have reached historic highs. These attacks represent a fundamental threat not just to individual news professionals, but to the practice of independent journalism and, ultimately, media viability. In a time of journalistic peril, news organizations and journalists must create a culture of safety—to protect themselves, their profession and their vital role in global society.

By **Elisabet Cantenys**, Executive Director, ACOS Alliance

Armed men attack the offices of a newspaper building, a news website is hacked, a photojournalist gets beaten by police, a news manager shot. The Mexican newspaper *Noroeste* has seen it all. Unfortunately, Noroeste's experience is not unique. Too many journalists live in fear, not only in Mexico. I've listened to their horror stories in many parts of the world—in their homes in remote villages, in newsrooms, workshops, meetings, and at conferences. I have visited injured journalists in hospitals and have spoken with far too many widows and families of imprisoned journalists. Does it need to be like this? What can we do to change it?

> "Safety is a prerequisite for independent and professional journalism and has a direct effect on media viability.

We need to create a culture of safety. Journalism ecosystems are crying out for deep systemic change in the way we approach safety issues, and ultimately, media viability. Most news organizations and initiatives are unprepared and exposed to threats, and new safety challenges have exposed them to this reality, more so recently due to COVID-19.
Safety is a prerequisite for independent and professional journalism and has a direct effect on media viability. Media viability refers here to the ability to be successful in all areas—in terms of journalistic content as well as the financial side of the business. How can a news organization succeed without addressing the threats that challenge its very existence?

Solid safety is built upon a holistic approach

There is a danger that safety and security end up reduced to physical safety. That's a very tangible and obvious dimension. However, the reality is more complex. A solid safety policy is built upon a holistic approach and incorporates digital, psycho-social, gender, and identity factors as well as ethical aspects. These are all interlinked and need to be addressed in sync if we expect safety and security measures to be effective. Narrowing safety to just one of these aspects will diminish our chance of success. We must acknowledge that news organizations' safety policies may not sway a drug cartel, a draconian media law, organized crime or a corrupt administration; but we know that these policies can be very effective in protecting the lives of journalists, and ultimately, independent journalism as a whole.

Aside from the moral imperative to protect all the individuals who contribute to a news product, investing in a robust safety policy can save a news organization from the financial loss and reputational damage of a crisis that could have been prevented and avoided, or could have been carefully managed. Safety protocols and policies are at the heart of a culture of safety. These are aimed at protecting all assets, and ultimately guarantee the existence of a news initiative.

The Mexican publication *Noroeste* is a good example. The newspaper has put in place their own safety protocols and thanks to these, the paper has learned to avoid and overcome all kinds of attacks. This includes clear check-in procedures for reporters covering challenging assignments—arguably one of the most simple, efficient and low-cost safety measures to put in place. They have also formed alliances with other news outlets to set publishing schedules to protect their reporters and editors on the ground. Moreover, they have established mechanisms to monitor threats after publication. They also adhere to rigorous professionalism and ethical standards, understanding how these are also safety aspects.

It's difficult to imagine how *Noroeste* would be able to perform and hold on to their independent reporting and investigations without preemptive safety measures and effective crisis management.

Crisis management protocols go hand in hand with protective safety measures. While safety policies and protocols have a preemptive approach, a crisis management protocol provides clear guidelines on how to react in the case of an emergency. It focuses on roles and responsibilities as well as actions to be taken with the aim of responding in the most efficient way when a crisis occurs. A good crisis management protocol will help a news organization to navigate a crisis adequately, minimizing negative consequences. Moreover, efficient safety and crisis management protocols have a positive effect on the mental well-being of everyone working for a news organization. They feel valued, protected and professional, which improves productivity and the reputation of the news organization as a whole.

The costs of safety protocols

How much is this going to cost? Less than the price of not having these protocols in place. To put it quite simply: news initiatives cannot afford to ignore the safety aspects of the job. Doing so would challenge their viability and limit their capacity to deliver and fulfill their role in society.

An example: a journalist gets arrested on false charges. Without a crisis protocol, this could easily turn into a long and expensive nightmare, and is often an effective way to kill a story. Being prepared will give those involved a better chance to overcome a challenging situation. Even more, a good safety protocol could prevent or mitigate catastrophic consequences.

The good news is that safety can easily be included in the work processes of the editorial team and doesn't need to involve expensive dedicated risk teams. Clearly, safety standards come at a cost, for measures such as insurance, safety training, and specialized equipment. However, protocols can be the most impactful and yet cost-effective element. Small and under-resourced news initiatives, in particular, can greatly benefit from these.

How to get started?

The first step is to scan the profile and nature of the news organization, including exposure to threats and tolerance for risk. It's also important for it to understand its own capacity and resources: for the creation and implementation of preventative safety measures, and for crisis management.

News managers and editors play a crucial role here. Their awareness and willingness to find answers to these essential questions can have a profound impact and will form the basis of a safety policy. This policy should briefly describe the organization's principles on safety and security, and roles and responsibilities within it. From there, the newsroom can create an in-house team in charge of developing safety protocols and overseeing their implementation. None of this is static — regular reviews and updates are necessary.

More work? Yes, but let's keep in mind that good processes are enabling. How else can a journalist or a reporting team succeed when pursuing a sensitive investigative story, or covering a rally or a contested national election? How else can a reporter reach out and protect his/her sources? Safety protocols facilitate difficult tasks and decision making, providing a high return on investment. The trick here is to integrate safety best practices into content production, as quintessential journalistic questions such as 'Why are we doing this story?' and 'Who is doing it?' have clear safety dimensions.

The time to start is now!

When to get started? As soon as possible. Considering the fact that newsrooms require time to adopt new routines, the sooner they get started and integrate these, the better. Ideally, safety policies should be an integral part of a news organization's initial business plan, informing strategy, identity, viability, and budget. Safety should not be an added afterthought. Many news organizations and journalists wake up to the safety call after a scare or a crisis. The point of creating and adopting safety protocols is to plan ahead, and it's never too soon.

To whom is this relevant? Safety is key across all organizations: large and small news initiatives producing news and current affairs content, whether commercial or nonprofit, regardless of the platform. Over the last few years, we have seen an increasing number of nonprofits creating or commissioning content. Safety protocols are essential for them as well, whether they are publishers or not.

Safety means safety for everyone

It's important not to leave anyone behind. As we see an increasing reliance on freelancers, these should not be perceived as a form of risk mitigation. News organizations should not approach working with freelancers as a way of outsourcing risks. Too often, news organizations with safety protocols in place do not factor in working with freelancers, leaving these and commissioning editors without clear guidelines and an ad hoc understanding (or no understanding at all) of their roles and responsibilities. A culture of safety does not make distinctions between staff and freelance, international or local staff — just as those who attack journalists do not care about this difference.

In 2020, the COVID-19 crisis placed safety concerns front and center for all journalists and news media, regardless of the nature and scope of their reporting. COVID-19 affected everyone, and it forced many news organizations and journalists to consider safety measures for the first time. Across the world, the pandemic highlights the existential need for independent and professional reporting, and how safety underpins both. This has created an opportunity for the journalistic community to realize how important and urgent it is to embrace a culture of safety, and to act on that realization. The sooner, the better.

The ACOS Alliance Safety Resources include the following protocols for news editors and managers:

- The COVID-19 News Organizations Safety Protocols
  ↗ **acosalliance.org/covid-19**
- News Organisations Safety Self-Assessment
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Ethical content, audience engagement and professional networks: The fundamental pillars of media safety

Enormous levels of violence, forced disappearances, and widespread impunity for these crimes have made Mexico one of the most dangerous countries for journalists worldwide. Moreover, there has been extensive online surveillance of independent reporters by officials. A protection mechanism for human rights defenders and journalists set up by the government in close collaboration with civil society organizations failed to provide the expected respite for reporters that are being attacked because of their work, mainly due to political unwillingness. Early hopes that the current government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (or short: AMLO) would improve the safety situation quickly faded as the President and other officials showed a readiness to regularly undermine the media's independence, calling them 'fake news'.

Despite this hostile situation, a number of independent online media start-ups have been set up in Mexico focusing on local news. DW Akademie spoke to Amapola's co-founder **Margena de la O Vargas**, **Ernesto Aroche**, co-founder of the news website Lado B, as well as **Jade Ramírez**, Coordinator of the media network Periodistas de a Pie, about working in one of the most challenging environments in journalism and the direct links between ethical content, audience engagement, networks, and safety.

Interviews by **Petra Aldenrath** and **Nadine Jurrat**

Ernesto and Margena — you both co-founded your own local independent media outlets in one of the most dangerous environments for journalists worldwide. What have been the biggest challenges so far?

Ernesto Aroche: At Lado B, our biggest challenges have been financial sustainability and labor security. We have been trying to resolve these, especially since Lado B was founded as a journalistic space that was supposed to be different from traditional media in Puebla and in the whole of Mexico — with a different, much more ethical journalistic agenda. We saw that other media outlets in Puebla were completely removed from their audiences or were just close to those people with political influence, who were sustaining the media outlet financially.

Our professional skills and our ethical values have enabled us to produce high quality content. As a result, we get much recognition and respect from our journalistic peers and, most importantly, from our audiences. The aspect that we paid the least attention to in the beginning was financial sustainability — for some time we financed Lado B with the income which we derived from working for other media outlets, which, of course, was very exhausting and not sustainable at all. But we soon realized that in order to ensure Lado B's viability, we had to fully dedicate ourselves to Lado B and stop working for others. So, we did!

Margena de la O: We are still a young media outlet. Financial sustainability, of course, is a big challenge. But every year we hold a meeting with our readers and discuss the topics we want to report on, which we even started before we founded Amapola. We organized a dinner with some supporters — our future audience — to discuss our ideas. This was our first fundraising activity, and it allowed us to create our digital news site. We also have a citizen editorial team, which consists of representatives from different civil society groups. It acts as an ombudsman and gives us feedback on our work. We are now trying to develop a subscription model together with the other members from the Periodistas de a Pie network.

Lado B and Amapola are both members of Periodistas de a Pie. What is the network's role in terms of safety?

Jade Ramírez: Initially, Periodistas de a Pie was a space for journalists to meet and exchange experiences. But of course, safety soon became an issue due to the increasing threats to journalists that started in 2006.

> "Our close relationship with our users is fundamental to our safety and to our viability.

To us, safety is closely linked to us journalists adhering to and identifying with high quality and professional journalism. This is what will make you different from other journalists and media outlets in this country, many of which have close links to those in power or have been captured by drug cartels. It is vital to distance yourself from that. And it's important to see the link between these relationships and the safety situation for media workers.

When a journalist gets killed in Mexico, the logical reaction is to call on the authorities to carry out a thorough investigation.

But what we really need to ask is: What was the reason behind the killing? How ethical was his or her content? Because, unfortunately, there are also many journalists that spread false information.

At Periodistas de a Pie, our vision is not to shield all journalists from aggression or to simply provide a protection mechanism to save a journalist's life—quite the contrary: We aim to generate the necessary overall conditions for reporters to stay in this profession and to help them reflect on their work. Our aim is to bring these journalists together so that they can discuss and work on certain issues, and for them to receive the capacity building they need.

We know that we won't be able to extinguish unbalanced and false journalism, but we want to highlight this issue and provide the necessary capacity building. In an insecure context like ours, it is important for journalists who produce high quality, ethical journalism to have the support they need, to have someone who will listen to them and be there for them in times of need—and that is the main role of Periodistas de a Pie.

Have Amapola or LadoB faced any concrete safety incidents?

Ernesto Aroche: At Lado B, we have had few security incidents. Once our offices were attacked, then police came looking for us at our private homes—not our offices!—after we filed charges. They said they were taking us to the judge, but we think that this was meant to be a sign, as if to say: we know where you live, we can always send the police out to you. But overall, we believe that we have not had any more incidents due to the networks we have created with Periodistas de a Pie and our journalistic prestige within the media community. The financial aspect is still the most difficult and leaves us

INFOBOX

Mexico

Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for media professionals in the world. Threats, abductions, and the killing of journalists covering organized crime, corruption or other sensitive political topics are common. In 2020 alone, five journalists were killed in direct retaliation for their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Fourteen journalists disappeared under mysterious circumstances, their whereabouts unknown to this day, and many more have been threatened.

Widespread impunity adds to the problem, leading to self-censorship among many journalists. Reporters Without Borders rank Mexico at 143 out of 180 countries in their 2020 World Press Freedom Index.

Despite this toxic environment for quality media, independent news outlets offering investigative and watchdog journalism are on the rise. There is, however, a lack of strong institutions protecting them and journalists' rights in general. Increasing polarization following the presidential elections in 2018 has further reduced the spaces for free media.

Television is the most important source of news in Mexico, with radio being the second biggest player, while the printed press has traditionally been oriented towards the elites. Tabloids, however, reach a large readership. Media ownership is highly concentrated, and most television channels and print media are owned by two media groups that belong to the biggest conglomerates worldwide. The government amended Article 6 of the constitution in 2013 to make access to the Internet a civil right—and the Mexican Internet market is one of Latin America's biggest with over 77 million active Internet users, representing 60% of the population (according to 2019 figures).

Lado B is a digital news portal based in the city of Puebla. It was founded in 2011 to counter the journalistic establishment in the region. Lado B follows an informative editorial line based on human rights and is transparent about its income to strengthen the trust of its audience, which it considers one of its viability pillars.

Amapola Periodismo is an independent online media site based in Guerrero, one of the most dangerous states for media workers in Mexico. Founded in 2019 by a group of local journalists with strong professional track records, the site wants to dismantle the official narrative on the problems facing people in Guerrero, and shows how structural violence is caused by corruption and the drug trade. It aims to build spaces for dialogue. Its reports are regularly featured in national and international media.

The network **Periodistas de a Pie (Red PdP)** started in 2007 as an independent collective of journalists united by the shared intent to integrate a social and human rights perspective into their reporting. In 2010, when the attacks against the Mexican press became systematic, the network was formalized as an NGO to train journalists in security and self-protection. Today, the organization unites and thus protects local journalists who seek capacity building in independent journalism or fight for the defense of freedom of expression and the right to information.

with the concern of how to ensure that the people working for us can report in safety and security, that they receive an adequate salary, get the necessary medical protection, and a proper pension when they retire.

Margena de la O: Up to now, we have not had any security issues, not as a media outlet nor at a personal level. Of course, there have been small incidents, but we have not had any direct threats. Our advantage is that all of us working at Amapola have a strong professional journalistic background and a solid track record in terms of professional reporting. This is a fundamental element in terms of security, and it was an essential criterion when we put together our team.

Is there a general awareness of the link between quality journalistic content and safety?

Jade Ramírez: For media outlets belonging to the Periodistas de a Pie network, this link is very clear and is getting stronger by the day. Many others, including the big media conglomerates, are continuing to report in a way that endangers not only their reporters but the people they are reporting on. Too many are not aware of the negative impact their reporting can have, especially big teams of reporters who are sent from the capital to very violent rural areas, do their reporting and then leave again. Often, local journalists and local communities have to deal with the consequences.

What role does the audience play in terms of safety?

Margena de la O: Our close relationship with our users is fundamental to our safety and to our viability. We have seen that when a journalist gets killed in Mexico, there is no outcry from the general public. And it's not that there should be because we as journalists are more important than others who get killed. Rather, it's about the role we play in society. When a journalist gets killed or threatened there is an implicit problem: I, as a citizen, am losing someone who will explain things to me and provide the information I need to take informed decisions. With so many journalists killed, people have become indifferent.

> “ We need to explain to our audiences why journalism is important.

We need to explain to our audiences why journalism is important. Because the people attacking journalists are also working hard to defame our profession as a whole, spreading the word that journalists are involved in organized crime and illegal businesses. Of course, these journalists exist but that should not keep us from investigating each case to find out what really happened and who is behind the attacks.

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Ernesto Aroche
is co-founder and Editor of Lado B. A graduate of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Ernesto has been working as a journalist for various national media outlets for more than 20 years. He has made local journalism his trench, journalistic investigation his battlefield and transparency one of his main tools, but also one of his journalistic obsessions. Ernesto is a board member of Periodistas de a Pie and coordinates the network's capacity-building activities for its members.

How do you plan to do that?

Margena de la O: Our engagement with the audience took quite a while. But we were thinking: how can we educate our audience to recognize what quality journalistic content is? It's really complex because we believe that the general public is also responsible for professional and good quality journalism, that their responsibility does not end with leaving their ten pesos at the newsstand. They also have to demand high quality, ethical journalism. We are still in the middle of this process and we see media and information literacy as a very important element.

Our audience realizes that Amapola is independent, also due to all of our audience engagement and fundraising activities. In our statutes, we have laid down that we can accept advertising money but never to promote a political candidate or certain policies.

How has COVID-19 affected the already difficult safety situation in Mexico?

Ernesto Aroche: Let me give you an example from Puebla: our Governor, who like our President regularly disqualifies media outlets that criticize him, constantly calls on the media to align themselves with his narrative as he argues that this is the 'security narrative'. This means that we must all send out the same message so that people follow the COVID-19 rules.

Of course, there is a certain logic to that, so as not to confuse the general population and keep infection rates low. But at the same time, it silences any criticism.

Jade Ramírez: In the first weeks of the pandemic, there were press conferences where politicians and journalists wore masks but were still standing too close to each other. Editors think: our journalists are used to working in a crisis, so they will know what to do in this crisis, too. However, reporters themselves feel that they are not prepared, but they have no choice but to continue doing their job if they want to keep it. There are no protocols in place to safely report on the pandemic, neither for journalists nor for their interviewees.

There is increased espionage and a more aggressive attitude, but this is a general phenomenon within the whole of society, not just towards journalists. In terms of espionage, we know that like other countries, Mexico has established protocols to ensure that mobile phones are being tracked for their geographical location to mitigate the risk of the virus spreading. Unfortunately, there is no time nor the opportunity for journalists to report critically on this issue and question the impact it has on society. Mexican journalists work in such precarious and insecure conditions that they don't have 'the luxury' to complain about worsening working conditions and increased stress. We just had a huge wave of dismissals of media workers across the country, so everyone that still has a job in this pandemic will not complain, for fear of losing their job too.

> "Precarity is the worst of all insecurities.

Margena de la O: When we started Amapola, we knew that times would be hard until we were sustainable. The pandemic has made this even more difficult—it has caused so much financial uncertainty. Precarity is the worst of all insecurities. Not having a regular salary causes depression and insecurity and costs a lot of energy. We need to accept that these are very complex processes.

What safety measures have you taken?

Margena de la O: We are very rigorous with editing what we publish and how we publish it, and we are very aware of the threats that exist. We sometimes spend hours discussing how we can report on certain topics without endangering our reporters or the communities we report on. Instead of saying: Due to security reasons, we cannot report on this, we ask: How can we report on this in a safe way for everyone? And we develop safety protocols. We are very clear what the security situation is in Guerrero, we live it every day. Of course, we can get things wrong, but we try to minimize the risks as much as possible.

Ernesto Aroche: Together with the other members of Periodistas de a Pie, we have been working on a safety protocol. This also includes a publication strategy to minimize possible attacks. At one point, one of the Periodistas de a Pie members in Veracruz had a very sensitive report which we knew could endanger the life of the reporter. As a safety measure, the members of the network decided to all publish this story at the same time.

At Lado B, we have also started to be very transparent about our income sources to build more trust with our audiences and strengthen this relationship.

At the big media outlets, there are some efforts to increase security, but these always focus on the individual journalist, not on the media outlet as a whole. When it comes to safety training, it's usually not the media outlet that is asking for capacity building but the individual journalist. And most of the training sessions are taking place in Mexico City, so they aren't very accessible for journalists based elsewhere.

Jade Ramírez: I am still so convinced that the solution for those that are affected by security issues is to organize themselves and have open discussions about these topics, also because there is quite a lot of fear of repression amongst journalists. If a media outlet, no matter how big or small, started setting minimal security and labor standards, it would see the benefits. Because while there are a lot of journalists around, and newsrooms can just fire one today and hire another tomorrow, there isn't an endless

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Margena de la O Vargas
is a reporter from the state of Guerrero, covering social movements and telling the stories of those who are struggling in every corner of the state. Before co-founding Amapola Periodismo, she worked for several national media outlets as a correspondent. She is a member of the Journalists' Association of the state of Guerrero (Asociación de Periodistas del Estado de Guerrero) and author of the book *Ayotzinapa, La travesía de las tortugas* (Proceso, 2015). She has been awarded a scholarship with the Press and Democracy program (PRENDE) at Ibero University (Mexico City) in "Narrative Journalism".

supply of qualified journalists. Media managers need to take on the responsibility of ensuring adequate, timely payment. We have colleagues working for big media outlets who have not been paid for a month or two.

How do you see the future of media safety in Mexico?

Ernesto Aroche: Given the poor financial situation in our country, I don't see any changes happening automatically. But I also think that new ways of connecting with the audience are currently being developed, also as alternative ways to improve financial sustainability. Of course, people are still experimenting, but I believe that in the long run this will bring good results for financial sustainability — as well as producing content that is closer to civil society, and further integrating civil society into media viability strategies. We should see the results in two to three years.

> "The stronger your professional trajectory is, the more secure you and your media outlet are.

Jade Ramírez: I don't see much opportunity for improvement, also due to the way that the current Mexican government is acting. In the middle of the pandemic, the government decided to give most of its advertising budget to the two TV conglomerates and cut their taxes, something that was not granted to all the independent media outlets which reported much more critically and were struggling financially. To me, this is a clear political message against media plurality.

Margena de la O: We must believe that there are opportunities in a crisis because otherwise we would not survive. We have new ideas every week to improve our content and our financial situation.

There are always defamation campaigns, trying to undermine us, but people know that we work professionally and that we don't take sides. And this protects us and our reputation. The stronger your professional trajectory is, the more secure you and your media outlet are.

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Jade Ramírez Cuevas Villanueva
is a reporter, producer, radio host and human rights defender. She is co-founder and Editor of the online media outlet Perimetral as well as a board member of Periodistas de a Pie where she also coordinates the area of Networks and Freedom of Expression. She has received several awards for her journalistic work on human rights, socio-environmental conflicts, and denunciation of corruption. After surviving a series of attacks as a result of her investigations in 2010, she began consulting for the Mechanism to Protect Human Rights Defenders and Journalists but resigned after denouncing fallacies and irregularities in the procedures and administration of the authorities involved in the mechanism.

Diversity threats

Cultivating relationships: How audiences can provide safety and sustainability

The West African country Burkina Faso has one of the most diverse and pluralistic media landscapes on the African continent. It was considered one of the most stable countries in the Sahel for decades, but from late 2018 onwards attacks by militant groups and local ethnic conflicts made it one of the most dangerous places for journalists in Africa. The increasingly tense security situation — especially in the north of the country — plus the COVID-19 pandemic have made the media's work even more difficult. Community radios La Voix du Paysan and Radio Vénégré have found innovative ways to engage closely with their audiences and thereby mitigate safety issues, which in turn also improves their financial situation.

In this interview, **Adama Sougouri**, Director of Radio La Voix du Paysan and **Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo**, Director of Radio Vénégré, discuss the specific challenges for community radio stations and how having a closer relationship with your listeners can protect you from physical attacks, financial hardship, and even food scarcity in times of crisis.

Interviews by **Petra Aldenrath** and **Nadine Jurrat**

La Voix du Paysan and Radio Vénégré are both community radio stations — how are you dealing with the current crisis?

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: There are a lot of challenges. Lack of funds is the most pressing one. We are living in a difficult region with rising tensions, in one of the poorest countries in the world. The advertising market here is not very developed, state regulations limit access to the advertising market for community radio and there is now hardly any income from small advertisers as small businessmen and -women don't have the money to spend on ads. Moreover, Radio Vénégré is only 35km away from the capital Ouagadougou — so companies prefer to focus on paying for ads directly in Ouagadougou, or in areas that are further away. And international donors or NGOs prefer to support stations in more rural areas.

The second biggest challenge has to do with the fact that we are working with volunteers, so professionalization is low. Our volunteers often also have other jobs — but they consider their work as journalists so important that they additionally work for us. This all leads to the fact that especially in the community radio sector there exists a great need for professionalization. In addition, we have insufficient equipment, no repair services close by, very bad Internet connectivity and as a result only limited use of social media. On top of this, we must deal with climatic conditions like thunderstorms, strong winds and so on. Another common problem for community radio in Burkina Faso is that often there is no professional management of the stations.

Adama Sougouri: For us in the north of the country, the biggest challenges right now are the security situation and the pandemic, which also lead to communities drifting apart. One of my greatest concerns is how to bring the different communities together again, how as a community radio station we can support a culture of solidarity.

Due to COVID-19, our finances are at risk as there are no new contracts for the informative radio reports which we used to produce as a service for NGOs. Advertising, too, has stopped. As a station manager I must take care of my team and explain to them the difficult situation we are facing. For now, we've adjusted our strategies and are doing research for international organizations on the extent of the disease in our region.

Which measures did you take to secure your funding — especially during the pandemic?

Adama Sougouri: Overall, we have decided to reduce as much expenditure as possible. This pandemic is a major financial challenge to all existing financing concepts. The most important thing is that we continue to pay our staff the already small fees so that they don't go hungry. Of course, this was at the expense of content production. We also don't do live reports in our broadcasting van anymore, as it is too expensive.

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: We have always had difficulties getting funds, but now this is even more so as the small street vendors and retailers who used to advertise with us have no income themselves. In terms of production, COVID-19 has

affected every single show, as we can't go out to the villages anymore. We try to speak to people on the phone, but many are too afraid of repercussions for them and their families. This means that rural voices are no longer being heard.

This also has a major negative effect on the station as a whole as people might feel that we no longer take them seriously. As a community radio station, our existence is based on being linked to the community. It's important to provide relevant information to the audience. But it's currently difficult to get interviews with experts and this then leads to the issue of the station's credibility. For example, people contact the station to check misinformation they have received on COVID-19 via social media. Early on, we couldn't provide a direct answer as we were unable to get an expert on the line. So, the listener would end up disappointed, and this affects our reputation. The credibility of community radio is extremely important. It depends on the professionalism of people working at the radio, our team knows what good quality is.

How important is your audience for your viability?

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: Long before COVID-19 we looked at ways to strengthen the viability of our radio station, starting with the sources of our income. At that time, the station received 70% of its annual income from donors and we realized that we had to change this.

We started with capacity building, because who's going to support us if we don't produce good quality programs? But this wasn't enough. Then we did a lot of monitoring and audience research to find out what the community needed. But this wasn't enough either. Community radio means that we want to hear the voice of the community, so we introduced many interactive programs. COVID-19 is a big problem for us as we cannot talk directly to our community.

> "People paid us for advertising once they noticed the quality of our programs.

So we also thought about how the community could support the station. Based on our analysis, we designed the flagship program, *"24 hours in a village",* where we took a broadcasting van to some of the villages to report directly from there. These programs don't just protect cultural aspects of the villages, they also brought us alternative income as people — street vendors, shop owners, intellectuals — paid us for advertising once they noticed the quality of our programs.

INFOBOX

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's media landscape is marked by pluralism and considered freer than most of its neighbouring countries (Rank 38/180 in RSF's Index). However, the West African country still faces obstacles to media freedom. After a significant improvement of the situation for independent media following the popular uprising and the fall of former president Blaise Compaoré in 2014, media freedom has been on the wane over the last four years — especially due to the increase of terrorist threats and attacks.

The precarious security situation in Burkina Faso and the tightening of media legislation since 2019 make the work of journalists difficult and restrict reporting about terrorism and the military. In the run-up to and the aftermath of the 2020 elections, the state authority for media regulation increasingly interfered in the work of media houses, and was heavily criticized for corruption. In addition, journalists continue to be poorly paid. Newspapers in Burkina Faso are read only by a small intellectual elite. Although Internet use is increasing (16% of the population in 2019) and online platform take-up has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic, radio remains the most important medium. Not-for-profit community radio is often a primary source of information, especially in rural areas.

The community radio stations Radio Vénégré with 1.9 million potential listeners and La Voix du Paysan with 2 million potential listeners play a significant role in giving a voice to the thoughts, problems and issues of the people living in their broadcasting area. With their work, they not only inform their audience about agricultural developments, health issues and important regional news, but also promote the development of the population in a conflict-sensitive way by respecting positive traditions of the different peoples.

La Voix du Paysan was founded in 1996 with the aim of promoting agricultural cultivation techniques. The radio station is based in Ouahigouya, the capital of the Nord Region, bordering Mali.

Radio Vénégré is located in the rural town of Ziniaré, about 30 kilometers northeast of the country's capital Ouagadougou. The station was founded in 1998 with the mission to give farmers a voice and create spaces for dialogue between farmers and decision-makers. It also aims to raise awareness around landworkers and the important role they play in the development of the region. The station is mainly financed by NGOs and councils, including an agricultural association which provides 2,500 EUR per year.

Does your close relationship with your listeners have a direct impact on your safety?

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: There are three examples that moved me a lot. The first one is in the context of climate change effects—extreme weather, storms, but also torrential rain that destroyed part of the station infrastructure as well as our equipment. What really touched me is that not only our partners supported us, but even our audience, many of whom are very poor, donated money for repairs. Another time, there was a rumor in the village that there might be terror attacks in our town. When one of our listeners received this information, he rushed to the station and told the moderator to lock the door. He wanted to protect his favorite radio host! The third example is related to COVID-19. One of our listeners, a teacher from a village nearby, worried about how staff of his favorite radio station were doing—he was worried because he knew that we can't go outside. He sent us two bags of rice.

In Burkina Faso, violence is intensifying as a result of a multifaceted rural crisis. Do you feel the impact?

Adama Sougouri: With regard to the security situation, the three provinces in the northern part of the country, La Boucle du Mouhoun, Le Nord and Le Sahel—are highly affected by terrorist attacks. For us in Le Nord province security is therefore an important topic. A concrete example: In the north, bordering Mali, there is currently a curfew in place due to the presence of jihadists. But of course, if something happens, journalists must react, even if it happens at night and everyone, including journalists, is meant stay inside. Going out is very dangerous for reporters. We want them to be safe. We must then make a quick decision in consultation with the team and the journalists on site, whether the journalists stay overnight in a hotel despite the curfew or just get out very quickly and go back home.

> "Radio stations that haven't realized that the community can also provide them with funds have come to the point where they are no longer able to pay their staff or the production costs.

What is your approach to staying safe and viable at the same time?

Adama Sougouri: Insecurity is growing. Therefore conflict-sensitive journalism is extremely important. The journalists try to remain neutral and let the local population have their say. We are very careful in our area, because you never know who you are dealing with. No matter where you are, you never know if the person you're talking to is involved in terrorism.

In all interviews we assume that we can never know the exact attitude of our interview partner. It is therefore very important that in a report about a village where many were killed, we stay neutral. We never say: we are on the side of the military and we should fight all terrorists. We simply present the facts. We let the people talk about their lives, so that we can understand where the possible sources of conflict might be. In the end, the point is that we all want a peaceful coexistence here. Quality journalism is extremely important, especially in precarious security situations.

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Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo
is the Director of Radio Vénégré. He is an experienced manager with a broad range of expertise in the development sector, including advocacy training techniques, participatory monitoring and evaluation, social mobilization, community management, outcome measurements, gender and climate issues, non-violent communication, and journalism training. Radio Vénégré is one of the most popular radio stations in its broadcasting region.

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: Media outlets that have most difficulties are those with no proactive approach. Radio stations that haven't realized that the community can also provide them with funds have come to the point where they are no longer able to pay their staff or the production costs. For us, it is also very important that we try to get people from the community involved and work with journalists from the communities. This pays off because they are more dedicated, they want to serve their community, they want to defend their community station as they understand how important it is.

What strategies do you consider important for the future of your community radio stations in order to survive these challenging times?

Jean-Baptiste Sawadogo: The credibility of the community radio station is very important, and this depends heavily on the professionalism of people working at the radio. We reported on COVID-19 from the beginning, how it affects your

health, how to protect yourself. I wanted my entire team to know exactly what COVID-19 is about. One of our biggest successes is that we created a network of local correspondents who received capacity building in journalism to work more professionally. They had a key role as they were also trained in reporting on the pandemic and had the task of keeping the community informed. They were part of shows when local voices were presented.

Adama Sougouri: Despite the pandemic, the broadcasts must continue to be good so that the audience continues to listen to us. A few years ago, we started a network with local journalists. They have been properly trained in journalism and they now report from their communities and send their reports via WhatsApp. With the onset of the pandemic, we threw ourselves at these local journalists. They were educated about COVID-19 and were able to work not only as reporters, but also as educators about the disease.

> “ The credibility of the community radio station is very important, and this depends heavily on the professionalism of people working at the radio.

We adapted the broadcasts to the needs of the community. Although we cannot go out anymore, we got together with the representatives of our 500 listener clubs and explained that we could no longer finance their favorite live-reporting shows from the villages. Together we developed alternative programs like a phone-in quiz show on COVID-related topics, where there is always an expert present.

The reaction of our listeners to the adapted programs has been positive. As for COVID-19—we can already say that more people than before consider it a disease. Not only thanks to our reporting, but through education in general. Our station is the most popular radio station in the region, and we want to keep this pioneering role. That is not so easy without the fancy live broadcasts.

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Adama Sougouri
is the Director of Radio La Voix du Paysan. The passionate radio journalist formerly worked as the manager of programming, as marketing manager, as a producer, and as trainer for high school student trainees. He is dedicated to conflict-solving journalism and has been honored with multiple awards, such as the Prix Galian for the best radio production in 2014 on conflicts between farmers and herders in the Nord Region.

The cost of silencing the voices of women and minority groups in the media

The COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation campaigns, unbridled misogyny online, and attacks against the media from heads of state and others are just some of the threats to journalists and journalism as a whole worldwide. Women-identifying journalists, journalists of color and those from underrepresented communities, however, are often the first and hardest hit in moments of crisis, contributing to the lack of diversity of voices we hear. Moreover, it is driving mistrust among communities who do not see their reality reflected in the news — and in the end will no longer consume it.

By **Elisa Lees Muñoz**, Executive Director, and **Nadine Hoffman**, Deputy Director, International Women's Media Foundation

With the rise of the coronavirus pandemic, authoritarian governments around the world have seized the opportunity to crack down on the press by criminalizing free speech, restricting access to information, and spreading disinformation. Journalists reporting unfavorably on the number of COVID-19 deaths in their countries have been singled out for abuse, with women journalists in particular being subjected to sexualized threats from troll armies. They have been hard hit by the pandemic, particularly freelancers who saw their assignments dry up overnight and whose movements were restricted when they were unable to show employment credentials. The rise on attacks on press freedom takes many forms and has an indelible impact on the viability of the news industry.

Worldwide trends documented by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) through ongoing work with thousands of women in our network point to specific ways journalists are being targeted, many of which are driving women out of the industry, thereby making the news media less representative, less equal, and less viable.

Four of the most prominent safety threats we have documented in the crisis impacting journalists, and women and underrepresented groups in particular, include:
- online harassment;
- misogyny in the field and in the workplace;
- pandemic fallout on press freedom;
- physical threats and attacks.

Journalists who remain in the industry, both male and female, have described changing approaches towards stories, and even avoiding reporting on certain topics that may result in a severe online backlash. Journalists find themselves passing on such stories or self-censoring the way they report to avoid the onslaught.

Based on IWMF data, gender equity goals and initiatives fall by the wayside as global leaders, policymakers and heads of industry tackle what they perceive to be more critical matters. They lose sight of the opportunity to fix cross-cutting, intersectional problems that permeate our societies and create long-term challenges.

This has a particular impact as women are more likely than their male peers to be primary caretakers for children or elderly parents. In a pandemic — where reporting a story could expose loved ones to infection — some women are making the painful decision that the assignment isn't worth the risk. That calculation comes with a massive loss: urgently needed income. Financial hardship, exacerbated by caretaking responsibilities, is forcing many women, especially freelancers, out of the news industry. Many face homelessness and food insecurity.

Regional trends become global in times of crisis

Worldwide, news organizations are laying off staff and local newsrooms are facing dire revenue challenges. These layoffs and closings of independent media outlets are a boon for many governments, who are also using COVID-19 to escalate attacks against press freedom, newsrooms, and journalists.

In Bangladesh, as in many other countries, the Prime Minister's attempts to conceal information about the pandemic led to attacks against journalists in the field. In the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia, journalists are facing charges and prison time for their critical reporting on COVID-19.

Mexico was already one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists before COVID-19. Now, journalists there face increased risks. In addition to attacks from organized criminal groups, hostility from government officials, and a nearly 100% rate of impunity, these journalists also have to deal with dire financial conditions in the current crisis. Because of COVID-19, media outlets are restructuring their business models by reducing and delaying payments to journalists indefinitely. Like others, the Mexican government has downplayed the risk of COVID-19 which has led to attacks on local journalists who report on the government's response to the pandemic.

> Online as well as offline, states are taking direct aim at journalists, with authoritarianism on the rise around the world.

Online as well as offline, states are taking direct aim at journalists, with authoritarianism on the rise around the world. The Committee to Protect Journalists' 2020 ↗**Global Impunity Index** points to "corruption, weak institutions, and lack of political will to pursue robust investigations" as a main factor in cases of impunity for attacks on journalists. The number of journalists murdered fell in 2019, and CPJ cites the use of other tools beyond physical attacks to intimidate reporters as having the same desired outcome as physical violence for repressive regimes—it leads to self-censorship, and the silencing of journalists whose stories they don't want told.

Online harassment and its real-world impact

Newsrooms have recognized the importance of protecting their reporters' safety in the field; however, the same sense of urgency is needed to address online attacks, which are equally effective in silencing journalists' voices, and which can lead to real-world danger. For example, a favorite tactic of white supremacist groups in the United States as well as in a number of Arabic countries is to dox journalists who report on their activities, publishing personal information like addresses and phone numbers, making them vulnerable to physical attacks.

Overall, online attacks are increasing. Perpetrators use various tactics across the board to attack journalists, but this tactic is most pronounced for women journalists and those from underrepresented communities who face online harassment and attacks every day, creating a hostile work environment, causing trauma, and impeding their vital work.

While online abuse affects journalists of all genders, women are especially targeted with misogynistic content and threats of sexual violence. This trend is global, and perpetrators include governments and their bot armies, Internet subcultures, racists, and people with political agendas. Some trolls belong to organized online groups that launch coordinated and sustained attacks, united in their hatred of women journalists participating in the digital public discourse. Women who report on feminist movements, women's health and reproductive rights, and other gender issues often find themselves under attack. Other tactics used to intimidate and silence women-identifying journalists and those from underrepresented communities are difficult to quantify and often overlooked as tactics used to infringe on press freedom.

According to the IWMF's 2018 research report with TrollBusters, ↗**Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Work**, 70 percent of women working in news media have experienced digital threats or abuse, and a third of them have considered leaving the profession as a result. A 2017 report by the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) and ARTICLE 19 detailed an increase in online attacks against female media workers, encompassing cyber stalking, sexual harassment, surveillance and unauthorized use and manipulation of personal information, including images and videos. Survey responses have also shown that a significant number were harassed as a result of the content of their reporting, and at the same time targeted for being women, or even attacked due to their gender and/or ethnic background. While these numbers are worrying, even more concerning is the fact that 43% of the victims did not take any action, and less than 10% reported the attacks to their employers. A journalist from Cameroon described what happened when she reported threats: "I was ostracised by other colleagues. No one wanted to be seen with me. I was removed from my office and asked to stop all work but continue reporting to the office. My salary was slashed."

Other women have spoken out publicly against their online attackers. Patrícia Campos Mello, a Brazilian journalist covering disinformation and politics for Folha de São Paulo, exposed that business leaders had paid to disseminate millions of fake WhatsApp messages to influence the presidential election in 2018. She wrote about her experience with Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's "office of hate" in a recent New York Times ↗**op ed**. "I have faced a violent onslaught of crude threats and personal attacks. Trolls and even politicians have shared memes where my face appears in pornographic montages in which I am referred to as a prostitute. People send me messages that say I should be raped… I am not alone. Many respected female journalists in Brazil have also been the target of misogynistic attacks."

> The many layers of threats journalists face, in particular women-identifying reporters and those from underrepresented communities (…) are driving them out of the news media. Without their voices and equal participation, we cannot have a free and representative press.

The vicious attacks on journalists like Campos Mello are being replicated by governments hostile to press freedom around the world, from El Salvador to India to the Philippines, and under the administration of Donald Trump also in the United States. International advocacy campaigns on behalf of high-profile journalists like **Maria Ressa of Rappler** have put a spotlight on this egregious tactic; however, heads of state on all continents have taken license to use the press as a political tool, and it is unlikely that this will abate.

The many layers of threats journalists face, in particular women-identifying reporters and those from underrepresented communities, have a tangible chilling effect and come at a huge cost for us all. These threats are driving them out of the news media. The compounding impact of a monolithic news media landscape contributes to lack of trust and, eventually, diminished profits for news media outlets. More importantly, without their voices and equal participation, we cannot have a free and representative press. Without a free and representative press, our societies are not truly democratic. The news industry and the press freedom community have the responsibility to do more to ensure their safety, online and offline.

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Digital threats

Journalism in times of crisis: Between digital threats and external media capture

In recent years, Lebanon has suffered a deep political and economic crisis, affecting the overall stability of this multi-cultural and multi-religious country. The explosion in Beirut harbor in August 2020 and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated these developments, leading to inflation, loss of income, and increasing frustration with the political elite among wide parts of the population. Once known as a regional media hub with a cultural openness and space for freedom of expression, the Lebanese media landscape has been polarized, with populist narratives and media institutions serving as mouthpieces for political propaganda. Since media outlets rely rather on investors as a source of revenue than on readership, there has been little incentive for those media outlets to produce independent journalism. The digital sphere, which since the Arab Spring had developed as a space for free expression, particularly for women and other groups that are often not heard in public dialogue, has become a place of increased surveillance and attacks.

In this interview, **Roula Mikhael**, Executive Director of Maharat Foundation, and **Mohamad Najem**, Executive Director of SMEX, share their experiences with the direct effects of the current crisis on the media, especially on digital security and viability.

Interviews by **Petra Aldenrath** and **Nadine Jurrat**

2020 was one of the most challenging years in Lebanon's history — how has this affected your work?

Mohamad Najem: We have seen the economy collapse, with the currency devaluing six-fold. This means that people are not able to afford what they used to afford, as most of the things we consume in Lebanon are imported from outside the country. The salaries of those working in the local economy have decreased: a schoolteacher's salary, for example, has fallen from 2,000 USD to 300 USD. On top of the economic collapse and the pandemic came the explosion in Beirut harbor on August 4th, which was one of the biggest shocks I have personally had.

COVID-19 has also had a huge effect. At SMEX we decided that we needed to continue our work — whether from the office or from home. We are a small, hybrid team but all these challenges have made our work slower. However, we did manage to host our annual Bread and Net Conference on digital rights in the Arab region at the end of 2020 with more than 800 participants — more than ever before. There was great interest in our sessions on threats towards journalists, COVID-19 apps, the threat to privacy, and the effects of Internet shutdowns.

Overall, there has been more demand for our work as COVID-19 has pushed us all more towards digital spaces. Access to digital tools has been growing, and there has been an increased demand for apps to collect data. At SMEX, we track these apps and publish our analysis.

Roula Mikhael: 2020 was definitely one of the most difficult years due to the many challenges at the economic, monetary and political levels, on top of the Beirut blast and the spread of COVID-19. However, for us this also meant that there was more work to do. Our role as a watchdog organization, monitoring freedom of expression violations, challenges facing journalists, and lack of transparency and access to information, steadily increased. The fact-checking work on our news website maharat-news.com also snowballed with the amount of misinformation spread along with a growing lack of trust and transparency. All this amid challenges related to our staff and management adapting to remote work to cope with the situation in an environment where our wellbeing is at stake.

At the regional level, there were challenges related to governments linking public health security to national security which resulted in shrinking civic spaces. Journalists and activists faced more pressure including online pressure from the public authorities.

Has the current economic situation in Lebanon, the aftermath of the explosion and the pandemic had an impact on the media in general?

Mohamad Najem: Definitely. The media is very polarized, some media outlets have been trying to expose the corruption, neglect and mismanagement that led to the explosion.

There has been some good investigative journalism that successfully uncovered the truth, but these journalists have all received threats or have been mocked online. In the end, authorities and politicians have not been held accountable.

The threat to journalists covering the protests on the streets has increased. We have seen a lot of legal threats. Journalists have been taken to court as a result of reporting on the protests, some have received online threats from politicians, and there are journalists who have been physically attacked.

The problem is not only the media but also the judiciary system, as so many judges are ruling along political lines. Moreover, people in Lebanon don't trust anything or anyone anymore.

Compared to other countries in the region, Lebanon has enjoyed some freedom in the past, but with COVID-19 on top of a tense political and economic situation, we really feel that the civic space is under threat from different enemies — political parties, the militia, external parties, and other Arab states.

On the other hand, the crisis has had some positive effects as well...

Roula Mikhael: ... yes, the current crisis has also been an opportunity for independent alternative media platforms to be more visible and to increase their audiences. New spaces emerged especially on platforms aimed at the young, such as Instagram, presenting alternative content in new formats that was able to bring more interaction and engagement. There was an eminent need on the part of the public, specifically young people, for critical voices calling for accountability as well as for fact-based journalism. However, independent media outlets were facing other challenges of viability, especially as the freedom of expression ecosystem was regressing in Lebanon. Maharat documented freedom of expression violations from the beginning of the protests in its annual report published at the end of 2020. The report documented violations in five areas: freedom of expression, freedom to protest, impunity, access to information and investigative journalism.

How has the quality of independent journalism been affected?

Mohamad Najem: When media and journalists are being treated as protestors and are beaten by security forces, it affects the role of the journalist in the specific incident. They become victims and may report on the event from the angle of a victim. At the same time, it highlights the fact that security forces are not treating protestors within the legal frame-work.

INFOBOX

Lebanon

Lebanon's media landscape is highly partisan and mirrors the political and religious rifts in the country. This dynamic is consolidated by non-transparent funding and media ownership structures. Although the Lebanese media are considered among the most vibrant and diverse in the region, the crises facing the country recently — including an economic downturn, the Beirut blast and the COVID-19 pandemic — have taken a toll on media viability.

Journalists' freedom of expression is restricted by social, political and religious taboos as well as by restrictive legislation that forbids defamation of the president and security forces. Laws against defamation, disinformation and cybercrime are broadly defined and frequently used to harass journalists, who can be persecuted by media or military courts. Arrests are common, especially for criticizing authorities and reporting about corruption. Attacks on media houses or individual journalists pose an additional threat. In Reporters without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Lebanon ranks 102 out of 180 countries.

Maharat Foundation is one of the leading organizations working on media viability issues in the MENA region, training viability consultants. Its Digital Media Viability Lab aims to support independent digital media platforms in the Middle East and North Africa.

Maharat Foundation aims to advance the societal and political conditions that enhance freedom of expression and access to information, both online and offline. The NGO engages and equips a progressive community in Lebanon and the MENA region with the skills and knowledge necessary to create change.

SMEX (Social Media Exchange) envisions an Arab world whose citizens can rely on the Internet as an engine of pluralism and prosperity. Its approach to advocacy involves initiatives in capacity building, movement building and localizing media empowerment. SMEX designs and delivers online and offline training on digital and social media use for citizens and produces training guides to establish inclusive standards across the region. In cooperation with other actors, it advocates constructive, user-centered Internet laws and policies—and defends against legislation that threatens human rights and freedoms.

We also see many journalists who self-censor because they don't want to have problems with the authorities.

Moreover, in Lebanon it's not the audience that pays for the media, it's often foreign sponsors with a political interest in our country. They use big media houses to spread their propaganda. Journalists are already paid low salaries, and this can be cut by the media 'sponsor' if they don't like what they are covering, which in turn can affect the quality of the content as well as the livelihood of any journalist. If a TV portal which is sponsored by foreign money is doing a report on human rights in the country of the sponsor, the journalists will not get their paycheck. Advertising budgets are also used to influence the editorial agenda.

Now with the financial crisis, the ability of the Lebanese people to pay for content is decreasing and for many not an option anymore. This means that the quality of the media has decreased as it is totally dependent on external funds and not on internal demand.

How does this affect the credibility of news media? Do people trust the news they consume?

Mohamad Najem: False news is easily spread in Lebanon. If you are consuming the news that is supporting your political narrative, people will believe it. This is a global issue and a big challenge. But I see a lot of demand for quality news. Many media outlets are losing more and more of their audiences due to the lack of trust. So, it's the right time to invest more in quality journalism—to expose corruption, to expose mismanagement and to cover the situation better.

In Lebanon, people are getting their news via WhatsApp, but it's mainly fake news and it's mostly politicized. This is especially true for people who live outside the capital, where there is less organic consumption of media and less critical discussion of facts and information. There is a huge need to find solutions for this and to have more local media support this.

> "Digital security is an important viability aspect, especially in hostile environments. However, a holistic approach should be adopted.

Roula Mikhael: People in Lebanon generally don't trust public sources. Maharat is now leading an initiative to fact-check rumors on COVID-19 that circulate via WhatsApp, where we are monitoring messages and open groups, and then recirculating the fact-checked news through the same channel of communication. There is definitely a need for increased fact-based media initiatives that would increase citizens' trust in media.

The independence of journalism is an important aspect of media viability. Do you see a direct connection between safety and security issues, particularly during crises, and the viability of media outlets?

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Roula Mikhael
is a journalist and the Executive Director of Maharat Foundation, a media development organization working in Lebanon and the MENA region. Previously, she worked for An-Nahar newspaper. Roula has more than 20 years of experience and editorial positions on media development, activism and civil society engagement. With her commitment to the defense of human rights focusing on freedom of expression, women's rights, and peace building initiatives in the MENA region, she led Maharat and voiced freedom of expression challenges at both local and international levels. Under her leadership, Maharat launched the news website Maharat-News, serving as a model of non-partisan journalism.

Roula Mikhael: Digital security is an important viability aspect, especially in hostile environments. However, a holistic approach should be adopted. Journalists and media organizations cannot solely focus on digital security, they also need to consider physical safety based on the threats they could face while doing their journalistic work on the ground.

At Maharat, we now consider safety to be one of the main pillars of our information and viability strategy. When Maharat started its news website, we didn't think about security issues that might affect us. This included checking where the server was located or if the host had another server to mirror our data, so that if we lose the server at least our data is not lost—something which happened to us once when the host company of our website was hacked.

When you start a media project you often neglect to think about these points. Now, based on the knowledge that we've gained, we know that we cannot start a project without considering digital safety and other security issues. Even small details like drafting a contract with the hosting company need expertise to ensure that all essential aspects are covered. Having a well-functioning and secure website is a big part of media viability.

Another viability aspect is finding ways to secure the work of your team and to find secure communication channels with your partners. This needs people with specific skills as well as a separate budget. Up to now, we have hired an external company to take care of our IT and digital safety, but this isn't viable. What we really need is someone in the team who takes care of this.

> "It is noticeable that online harassment of journalists increases in times of crisis, especially in countries that witness repression or chaos in the political scene.

Will the demand for digital security increase in the near future? And if yes, how?

Roula Mikhael: Online threats aimed at journalists and activists who are using social media platforms to criticize public figures are increasing in Lebanon, particularly online harassment of women journalists. This is definitely hindering them from expressing their views and is putting pressure on them not to follow up on issues of accountability. Thus, there is a need for journalists and activists to be equipped with tools and techniques to deal with such forms of online threats, and to be better protected. It is noticeable that online harassment of journalists increases in times of crisis, especially in countries that witness repression or chaos in the political scene.

Mohamad Najem: In Lebanon, we feel that the civic space is generally under threat from different enemies—political parties, the militia, and external groups. Digital issues are definitely increasing with more people receiving digital threats, not just in Lebanon but in the entire Arab region. SMEX monitors online threats and runs a hotline and a help desk for those affected. We have been receiving more requests for the helpdesk since the start of the pandemic. At the same time, we see that the threats are becoming more complex.

One of the concerns we hear from our community is the size and the power of the big tech companies and how they decide what content is removed. They are becoming stronger and bigger than nation states. We are also concerned about new laws being adopted in Europe or in other regions which send the wrong message to political leaders in the Arab world, who will use them as examples to restrict freedom of expression. In Iraq and Sudan, for example, Internet shutdowns are a concern. In Egypt, women are being arrested because of their TikTok videos and people are being imprisoned for their political views. Threats against women online is a huge concern as well as how Twitter is manipulated to threaten journalists.

We are addressing this by doing more research, by talking about it and addressing it with the big tech companies. It is very important to continue pushing back by understanding what is going on, talking about it, holding big tech companies accountable and by creating coalitions with other groups in the MENA region.

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Mohamad Najem
is the Executive Director of the Beirut-based digital rights organization SMEX, the Middle East and North Africa's leading organization for digital rights research and policy advocacy in this field. His work includes local and regional advocacy campaigns, research on privacy, data protection, and freedom of expression. He organized "Bread & Net", the first conference in the MENA region that tackled topics related to technology and human rights. Mohamad works as a trainer, speaker, and consultant for diverse NGOs and civil society groups in the Arab region.

The invisible threat: Digital security as an essential pillar of media viability

Whilst most media outlets focus on economic or societal challenges to their viability, digital security is often seen as a lesser priority. The core reason is that digital threats are non-visible, often not tangible and therefore theoretical. However, there's a relatively simple way out: threat modelling.

By **Daniel Moßbrucker**, freelance journalist and trainer for digital security

The Internet was a great discovery for the media: offering them opportunities to develop new strategies for production, publication and distribution of their content. By definition, the Internet is a technology of freedom: potentially accessible to everyone due to open protocols, decentralized infrastructures with an inbuilt potential to circumvent state-driven monopolies of power, open for new software developments by everyone for everyone and for every purpose. These convictions about the Internet were at least true for the first years of the World Wide Web, and strengthened the myth of the online world as a new world of freedom and democracy.

And today? It seems that this myth has morphed into a dystopian reality for the media: "the Internet" is now seen as responsible for a fundamental economic crisis among legacy media; the undermining of basic news integrity by systematic spreading of fake news; and the weaponization of hate that shuts down open discussion in favor of partisanship for political actors, or just random trolling.

How could this happen? The simplest answer is: We are seeing these dramatic levels of misuse by large groups in a society, not despite the Internet being open and free, but because of that very fact. Alongside the clearly positive effects for society, there are countless examples where those seeking control have misused said freedom.

Non-visible digital threats are the problem

So it looks rather as if creating a digital news ecosystem with sustainable revenue streams should be a first priority for the majority of media organizations fighting to stay viable. And this is what they mostly focus on, as well as their ability to handle challenges like "hate speech" or "misinformation". This is a reasonable belief, but another negative side-effect of digitalization is still too often overlooked: digital security breaches. Organizations must recognize the need for strong IT security within their infrastructure, as well as digital safety routines for journalists and media activists in their work. If this is neglected, all other efforts will be in vain.

Being open and operating in an open infrastructure also means being vulnerable, for example to account hacking, the physical search of unprotected smartphones or surveillance of communication by states. While these threats are well known in the media sector, efforts to counter them are still relatively weak, both in terms of raising awareness as well as in terms of investing in secure IT infrastructure. This discrepancy between known threats and the almost fatalistic acceptance of them seems paradox. However, it's actually quite easy to explain.

> "Organizations must recognize the need for strong IT security within their infrastructure, as well as digital safety routines for journalists and media activists in their work. If this is neglected, all other efforts will be in vain.

It's not new to media actors that they have to counter certain threats. By definition, good journalism questions and criticizes those who (want to) have power. It's the basis for journalism's right to exist in a society, its raison d'être: the promise to its audience to serve the public, conducting research in the public domain, even if this means fighting to overcome substantial barriers of power, knowledge or money.

However, traditionally most threats were obvious and public: Reporting on a demonstration and being harassed by people sensitizes journalists to the need for physical protection; government-enforced regulation that encroaches on press freedoms has to be publicly communicated by law, and this can be fought in court; PR agencies producing "news" for commercial interests, seeking to influence or even manipulate public opinion, can be subjected to independent scrutiny in an article. Seeing threats doesn't mean, of course, that countermeasures are successful by default. But humans tend to protect themselves and their assets especially if a danger is concrete and known.

Here's the problem: Most digital threats are non-visible, and to many also not tangible enough to develop countermeasures. It might happen that the social media account of a newsroom has been successfully hacked, and yet the newsroom never becomes aware of it. Another example: Journalists fail to recognize that their phone calls are being intercepted by a third

party, such as the police. Digital risks are mostly theoretical, potential threats, and the person or organization being surveilled may never find out whether the perpetrator was successful or not. Or worse: Even if the surveillance or hacking is discovered, it's typically too late. Knowing that an account was hacked might prompt the victim to install better security settings in the future, but the data is in fact already lost. Establishing that a computer is infected with ransomware and the malicious software is encrypting all data stored on it doesn't halt the attack—it's too late.

Countering threats is essential for media to stay viable

As we enter a data-driven society, risks to the integrity of data or even loss of access to it could be mission-critical for both the editorial and the financial success of media outlets, and therefore for their viability. If dozens or hundreds of employees lose access to their data because a company's system is infected with a ransomware-trojan, within seconds the company is unable to continue its work.

Moreover, a solid security system is essential to the public role of journalism: The media cannot be an effective watchdog and check the actions of government if this government has access to its communications. Countering these threats is essential for media to stay viable.

> “ If dozens or hundreds of employees lose access to their data because a company's system is infected with a ransomware-trojan, within seconds the company is unable to continue its work.

To do this, it's important to overcome the “dilemma of prevention” innate in digital security. Media outlets have to invest in their digital security efforts—money and/or human resources—in order to stay digitally safe, even if they do not “see” the threats. However, the dilemma is that even those organizations who invest in their security will never be sure whether their efforts have paid off, because the threats are invisible anyway.

So, outlet A investing in digital security seldom has a clear advantage over outlet B that has invested nothing. The wisdom of the investment could only be demonstrated by outlet A successfully warding off an attack that outlet B could not. However, it's also possible that both A and B sustain a breach without being aware of it, for example due to unknown surveillance methods for which as yet no defense exists. In this case, the investment may even become unjustifiable, because it was not enough to counter the threat.

Doing nothing in relation to digital security is not really an option, either. It would mean becoming more and more vulnerable over time, and therefore a more likely target. Cyber criminals, for example, like to choose the worst-protected victim available, as it means they don't have to invest much in their skills and still have a great chance of success. Aside from this, it would send a negative message to potential sources if the media outlet were obviously not properly equipped to keep its data safe.

Threat modeling: a rational way to invest in digital security

To overcome the dilemma of prevention, there's actually only one option: Accepting that data protection is mission-critical for any media outlet, the only option is to constantly assess their digital situation via a so-called ↗**threat model**. This is a structured process defining a media outlet's protectable data, identifying potential attackers and their capabilities, and lastly making a list prioritizing threats that are considered most likely to happen, while others remain abstract and theoretical. Such a threat model is an indispensable component for a holistic security concept, reflecting digital and physical risks as well as legal considerations, so that it clearly shows where it's best to invest resources.

This is not a foolproof solution for the dilemma of prevention, but it's still the most rational way to invest in digital security. From IT consultancy we know that absolute security is not possible; moreover, state-driven attacks in particular are probably hard to counter at all, if state actors are really determined to access someone's data. Their financial, personnel, technical and legal resources are enormous. Relatively unsophisticated attacks by cyber criminals or online trolls, however, are easy to detect in advance and also fairly easy and cheap to stop before they happen. It's an investment in the safety and security of journalism, and therefore another factor of increasing importance for each media outlet's viability.

Synopsis

What can we learn from the practical experiences of journalists about the link between media safety and media viability? What role does quality content play in media safety and media viability? Why is digital safety especially important for media viability in crisis situations and what does audience engagement have to do with it all?

Journalists from the Philippines, Mexico, Lebanon and Burkina Faso and media safety experts give answers in this publication. Accoding to them media safety plays a crucial role in media viability. Media outlets that include physical, digital and labor safety in their business strategy from the beginning, that establish a security culture in their newsrooms, relate closely to their audience, and provide high quality and balanced journalism are both more resilient and better protected against external attacks.

The interviews and the analyses by the experts show that:

- **Quality content increases safety.** The editors interviewed for this publication confirm that fair and balanced journalism, which clearly distinguishes between facts and opinion and treats the people at the center of the story with respect tends to lead to increased respect from the audience and makes the journalists less of a target for potential attackers. It also increases trust on the part of audiences as well as with advertisers willing to pay for content.

- **Audience engagement plays a crucial role in terms of safety.** No matter whether through a membership model, regular informal exchanges or listener clubs — an audience that values a certain media outlet will be less likely to accept any attacks against it.

- **Flexible and resilient business models are a must-have.** They help organizations to react to new threats, to adapt strategies, and to maintain high quality and independent reporting in times of crisis.

- **No viability without digital security.** A media outlet that loses all its data or whose data gets hacked and its sensitive sources revealed, loses everything — content and credibility. Online attacks are more likely and easier to carry out than physical attacks. Digital security is an essential part of any safety concept.

- **Diversity pays off.** During the COVID-19 crisis, women and minority groups came under particular attack all around the world, online and offline. To include their stories and perspectives is not only a moral obligation but also makes business sense as they make up an essential part of audiences anywhere on the globe.

These examples demonstrate that **media safety and media viability are symbiotically linked and are strongly interdependent**. Investing in safety and security measures — whether through safety training, safety protocols, advocacy for improved legal frameworks or digital security — not only saves lives but also strengthens the business ecosystem of a media outlet.

Authors

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Petra Aldenrath
loves to write portraits and long-form articles. She is an experienced journalist who has worked for newspapers, magazines, and radio. Her work has been published in several books. For five years she was the ARD correspondent for Mongolia and China. She has also worked as a freelance reporter in Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Canada and Israel. She has been working at DW Akademie since 2018. She is part of the viability team and particularly interested in telling the stories behind the organization's diverse media development projects.

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Elisabet Cantenys
is the Executive Director for the ACOS Alliance, an unprecedented coalition of news organizations, freelance journalist associations and press freedom NGOs working together to champion safe and responsible journalistic practices. She has led the Alliance since 2016 and manages a rich program of activities focused on creating a culture of safety across newsrooms and among freelance and local journalists worldwide. Previously, Cantenys has worked as Head of Programmes at The Rory Peck Trust and as a freelance documentary producer, radio journalist and writer in New York, London and Barcelona.

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Nadine Hoffman
is the IWMF's (International Women's Media Foundation) Deputy Director, and she can often be found wrangling journalists in under-reported places. After starting her career as a reporter in Boston, Nadine transitioned to non-profit work, focused on international human rights and education. She has been a part of the IWMF team since 2010. She is passionate about developing programs to support the IWMF's global community of female journalists, traveling to far-flung places, and smashing the patriarchy.

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Nadine Jurrat
is senior consultant at the Research and Evaluation department at DW Akademie, where she focuses on media viability. She has over 17 years of experience in international media development. Prior to joining DW Akademie, Nadine mainly worked in the field of safety and security for journalists working in conflict zones, fragile states, and closed societies. Nadine trained at the London School of Journalism and holds a B.A. (hons) in French and Hispanic Studies from Queen Mary University of London as well as an M.A. in Area Studies (Latin America) from the University of London.

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Daniel Moßbrucker
is a freelance journalist and trainer for digital security. He studied journalism at the TU Dortmund and digital journalism at the Hamburg Media School. As a journalist he regularly publishes about the topics surveillance, data protection and internet regulation. Moßbrucker is a trained trainer and trains journalists at home and abroad in digital security and Darknet research. He advises editorial departments and NGOs strategically on the development of their IT security. In this context, he also worked for Reporters Without Borders and DW Akademie, before starting a dissertation project in which he has been investigating the effects of surveillance on journalism.

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Elisa Lees Muñoz
is the IWMF's Executive Director. Elisa leads the organization to achieve its mission to support women journalists to develop their careers by providing training, tools and assistance so that they can work as safely as possible. She is charged with growing the IWMF by expanding its programs into new geographies; introducing new initiatives such as Hostile Environments and First Aid Training (HEFAT); partnering with other organizations; and driving communications and outreach to our core constituents. Elisa has been a human rights activist since graduating from the University of Maryland with an MA degree in International Relations. Before joining the IWMF as Director of Programs, Elisa lead the Crimes of War Education Project.

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