



'Adaptability is in our DNA': how our partners make **independent journalism** pay

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All over the world, media are asking themselves how to make independent journalism financially sustainable. In countries where press freedom is restricted, this can be even more challenging. We talked to three of our partners about the hurdles they face and what they are doing to overcome them.

Enrique Gasteazoro, Confidencial, Nicaragua



Sustaining an independent media outlet in Nicaragua was already difficult before its ongoing crisis took hold of the country, according to the CEO of Confidencial, Enrique Gasteazoro. When the country's worst political crisis since its civil war happened, existing sources of income decreased or fell away altogether and producing independent journalism became more costly - and risky. The outlet had to fight for its survival like never before.

"In the past year, we had to change our model several times," says Gasteazoro. "Even before the crisis we were drilling adaptability into our DNA – we have to be able to respond to disruption. But we didn't expect this kind of disruption so fast," says Gasteazoro.

Confidencial is one of few independent media companies in the Central American country. It puts out a news website, a weekly print magazine and two weekly TV programmes, which are currently transmitted on YouTube and social media only due to government censorship. In April 2018, anti-government protests were violently repressed by groups loyal to President Daniel Ortega and Vice-President Rosario Murillo. In the months that followed, hundreds of Nicaraguans died as a result of the unrest. Press freedom has been severely restricted.

"Knowing yourself as an organisation and knowing where you want to go is key to being creative and innovative under normal circumstances, but even more, that's how you can survive in extreme crises" - Enrique Gasteazoro

Confidencial's independent reporting made its journalists targets of threats, harassment and attacks. Some have been forced into exile. In December, the company's editorial offices and TV set were raided by police and later seized. The crisis also had serious consequences for Confidencial's

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financial viability. Television ad revenues took a serious hit: an economic crisis resulting from the violence meant businesses had less to spend. Moreover, some companies withdrew ads for fear of reprisals over their association with Confidential.

Confidential has tackled the crisis head on. With support from Free Press Unlimited, they have worked hard to develop and try out new digital strategies to overcome censorship and new models to diversify their income. The outlet is having some success with a new model that is a hybrid between a digital subscription and a crowdfunding campaign. They have also developed new initiatives in Costa Rica, which is home to a large Nicaraguan diaspora, including a weekly segment in the country's leading news programme. The main thing Confidential is betting on, says Gasteazoro, is expanding its reach, audience engagement and monetisation on YouTube.

The situation in Nicaragua is still volatile and it's uncertain what's on the horizon for Confidential. Having a clear strategy is essential in being able to change and adapt as often as needed, says Gasteazoro.

“Knowing yourself as an organisation and knowing where you want to go is key to being creative and innovative under normal circumstances, but even more, that's how you can survive in extreme crises,” he says.

Nataliya Gumenyuk, Hromadske, Ukraine



Hromadske is an online and satellite TV channel in Ukraine that provides impartial public interest broadcasting in a media landscape dominated by political and corporate interests. Its Head of Organisation, Nataliya Gumenyuk, accepts that for now, money from donors such as foreign governments and non-governmental organisations make up the lion's share of Hromadske's income.

The problem is that there's very little “clean money” in Ukraine to fund independent media with, Gumenyuk explains. The vast majority of the country's existing media outlets are owned or influenced by politicians and business tycoons. For Hromadske's founders, it meant they had to abandon early plans to find major investors to support the TV station. “In Ukraine, you more or less can't have a big business without being in politics, so we had to get rid of this idea,” says Gumenyuk.

“The market is broken. Even at the regional level, local minigarchs have their own stations,” she says.

Gumenyuk is proud of what Hromadske has achieved with limited resources from donors. They have a staff of about 150 people, much less than most commercial TV stations. “What we are doing is really efficient, it has impact. I don’t like this discussion of how do you get rid of donors. If there’s no clean money, what do you do?”

Still, Hromadske is among the most innovative media companies in Ukraine and is working hard to generate income independently. In 2018, it experimented with business models including selling rights to its documentaries and organising a charity concert. Since recently, Free Press Unlimited is giving Hromadske support to help develop and try out new business models.

Like Gasteazoro, Gumenyuk believes having a clear strategy is indispensable. “Sustainability is about having an institution built around an idea. It’s about moving in a clear direction which is very transparent for stakeholders, for the audience, for the funders – and for possible investors,” she says.

Owais Aslam Ali, PPF, Pakistan



Owais Aslam Ali is the Secretary General of the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF). He believes that the prevailing business model for media in Pakistan is harming the quality of journalism in the country.

“The business model is really flawed. It’s a model that promotes mediocre content and unethical practices among journalists,” he says.

Owais Aslam Ali explains that there are dozens of media outlets in all of Pakistan’s major cities. Their main source of income is ad sales, but with so many media companies, there’s not enough to go around. It means that many journalists work for no or very little pay and have to produce large volumes of work day in day out. As a result, says Owais Aslam Ali, “the bulk of our journalism is based on press releases or events coverage.”

With PPF’s Investigative Journalism Fellowship, Owais Aslam Ali aims to promote investigative journalism in a country where there is barely any money for it.

Through the fellowship, reporters from small and large publications from all over the country get three months to build their investigative journalism skills. A stipend allows them to focus exclusively on large investigative projects which they complete with the help from senior journalists who act as mentors.

It may not be a solution for Pakistani media's broken business model, but at least it is a way to equip the country's journalists with new skills and improve the quality of their work. Owais Aslam Ali is pleased with the amount of coverage the investigations resulting from the fellowship have received.

“One example is a story about the mistreatment of prisoners which received one-and-a-half page of coverage in Pakistan's largest newspaper, Dawn – a really rare occurrence,” he says. Another fellow, Niaz Ahmad Khan, won an award for Best News Investigation of the Year in the Pakistan Data Journalism Awards.

Owais Aslam Ali: “We're providing media with stories that they had not been able to do had it not been for this fellowship.”

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