INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN EXILE

a research report on challenges
faced by independent media in exile

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FOREWORD

This report was developed by two students from the University College Maastricht, within the framework of a research internship at Free Press Unlimited, Amsterdam. The supervisors were Dr Christine Gutekunst and Ms Saskia Nijhof. The assignment was to re-assess the challenges that independent exiled media are facing, using the research framework of Bill Ristow (2011), developed for a report written for the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), an initiative of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy.

On behalf of Free Press Unlimited I would like to thank the students - Anežka Hlinovská and Nesle de Schutter - as well as Mr Ristow and Dr Gutekunst for their commitment to this research. Mr Ristow was of invaluable help, as he kindly shared his survey data and contact details of key informants. I would also like to thank all representatives of exiled media for their time and availability to be interviewed.

The research findings are highly relevant for Free Press Unlimited, for other media development organisations, and for funding organisations, seeing that funding is inconsistent and still direly needed for media in exile. The extent of physical and digital insecurity of exiled media actors is alarming. I hope that this report can serve as a call for more support, and ensure that independent media in exile can continue their important work and ensure access to reliable information for populations in distress.

Amsterdam, 24th of August, 2021

Saskia Nijhof
Head Knowledge & Quality
Free Press Unlimited

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Where freedom of the press is restricted, sometimes the only way for journalists to keep an independent voice is to leave their countries. Many of them are forced to do so as a last resort. Those journalists can be part of media outlets in exile or work independently as freelancers. They can run news channels, conduct investigations, produce documentaries or publish news on social media. Both their professional and personal conditions vary significantly. As one of the participants notes: “everybody has their own story of what it means to be an exile. And they are not the same. Yet, the essence of them is the same.” This report aims to provide a qualitative insight into the most significant challenges faced by independent media in exile nowadays.

Why exactly do journalists leave their countries? After facing more and more obstacles to their independent reporting at home, it seems that direct physical threats to their security often are the catalyst to leave. Yet, the journalists are still confronted with insecurity even beyond the borders of their home countries; while often less prevalent, these threats are still present. However, in the Internet age, it seems that digital insecurity has become the primary issue. Constant efforts of the governments at home to mute journalists' voices, cyber-attacks, or permanent online harassment are only some of the problems that media in exile have to face in a digital environment. Digital security is even more pressing, as the Internet is vital to spread the journalists’ work and maintain contact with their audience and sources. Media in exile also experience significant insecurity regarding financial sustainability. Operating as a media in exile is costly, and the available options for generating income suddenly become heavily restricted. Media in exile thus have to rely on donors. Yet, especially for new media, access to donors can be difficult, and the funds tend to be inconsistent, which hinders the outlet’s ability to grow.

The physical separation of media in exile from the country on which they report entails two more challenges. Firstly, media in exile need to reach their audiences despite regular attempts from authorities in the home countries to prevent this. Monitoring the audience's reach and analysing the data can be effective instruments to address this challenge. Secondly, as the journalists are not in the country themselves, gaining access to reliable information becomes more complex and dangerous. Yet, technological instruments can still provide a significant opportunity to ensure safe communication with sources. Being in exile also often means leaving your family, friends, and professional recognition at home, without knowing whether and when it will be possible to return. Whether in media outlets or as

freelancers, journalists who were forced to leave their country may experience fear for their family, personal and professional isolation, and all the above-described challenges can also impact their mental health. Journalism in exile entails significant psychosocial difficulties which should not be overlooked. Besides external support, such as language training in the new country or legal and psychological assistance, another proposed remedy are networking possibilities. Creating operating networks among the journalists would enable them to see the work of other journalists, discuss it, collaborate or simply provide each other mutual support. All in all, this would give more visibility to exiled journalism.

The prospects of return in the foreseeable future are for the majority of the journalists rather pessimistic. Yet, despite the uncertain future and the challenges that exile brings, they are still passionate and dedicated to their work. Without them, many individuals in the world would be entirely deprived of a fundamental right; the access to independent information.

I. INTRODUCTION

Several reports affirm that freedom of the press is shrinking globally (Freedom House, 2019; Reporters without Borders, 2021). According to Freedom House (2019), media freedom has been regressing over the last ten years in authoritarian and democratic societies alike. Freedom House (2019) shows a broader trend in the decline of access to information from an independent press, especially in Europe, Eurasia and, finally, in the Middle East. The report notes that independent journalism is not only threatened when journalists are arrested but also, in more subtle ways, when the media compromise their independence under the pressure of governments. Freedom of the press is intrinsically linked to the preservation of democracies and society's freedom as such. Without the plurality of voices and access to independent information, people are deprived of the right to make free and informed choices (Freedom House, 2019). In many places, those voices cannot be raised, and the only option becomes to speak from outside of their countries. This report highlights these voices who resist oppression and fight for access to reliable information in countries where this right is threatened.

Defining Independent Media in Exile

An exile medium can be defined as "a media outlet that can no longer function in the country relating to its content, and operates in either self-imposed removal or enforced removal, due to danger" (Cook, 2016, p. 1-2). Journalists are forced to leave their home countries as they are no longer able to safely do their work - delivering objective information to their audience - due to the pressures exercised against them. Yet, as Bill Ristow notes in his report for CIMA (2011), some individuals have only become journalists after they had to leave to exile, mainly due to their political opinions or activism. In exile, they subsequently become acquainted with the standards that the journalistic profession requires.

It is crucial to make the distinction between media outlets in exile and journalists in exile. 'Media outlets in exile' refers to organisations forced to leave their country or outlets already established in exile. Those outlets can also be joined by journalists who did not have to flee themselves. In contrast, the term 'journalists in exile' refers to the individuals who had to leave their home countries. They can work either in the outlets or continue reporting as freelancers. Alternatively, they can also engage in media outlets falling out of the usual definition of exiled media outlets, such as projects targeting refugees from the home country. These distinctions have implications for the different challenges that media in exile face. This

report aims to explore both the organisational challenges of the outlets and the individual situations of the exiled journalists, whether they are freelancers or part of an outlet.

Foster (2019) further adds that exiled media should be “independent and actively reporting using professional journalism standards" (p. 8). The notion of independence is complex. While Cook (2016) stresses that these media outlets are “independent from, and alternative to, the state-controlled information stream” (Cook, 2016, p. 521), Ristow (2011) defines independence in negative terms. The report indeed mentions that it shall not include journalists “who work for large governmental-sponsored organisations” (Ristow, 2011, p. 3). For this report, a key characteristic is the editorial independence of the media, and the dedication to report objectively without serving political interests or satisfying editorial pressures. Based on those insights, independent media in exile are identified as media who cannot report independently and safely in their countries and therefore have to operate in exile, whether as organisations or individual journalists.

Recent Trends and Independent Media in Exile in the World

Defining what independent media in exile are is further complicated by the changing nature of journalism in general. Schönert (2019) reflects on this by asking: “should a YouTuber who occasionally talks about political issues but who has never worked in the formal media sector be considered a journalist?” and: “does someone who was forced to leave Turkey for posting on Facebook also count as an exiled journalist?” (p. 2). Those questions also have implications for exiled media, especially for an overview of their current status, and for an estimation of their number in the world. Digitalisation has impacted journalism, and it seems that in the ‘Internet Era’, becoming a journalist is easier than before. In Ristow’s report (2011), Eric Johnson, the former director of Internews International, had provided an estimation of exile media outlets and stated that there are “maybe 50 serious exile media [outlets], with an average of 10 journalists each, some paid, some not” (p. 13). Ten years later, in an interview for this report, Johnson stresses the increasing significance of independent bloggers, exiled journalists running their Telegram channels and other ‘new’ forms of exiled journalism. He estimates that next to the 50 serious exile media outlets, there are from 5 to 15 smaller-scale media or individual journalists for each country that has media in exile. Discussing the case of Germany, a report by Körber-Stiftung notes that today, “it is not even remotely clear how many exiles live in the country” (Schönert, 2019, p. 2). Yet, the report affirms that the number of exiled journalists seems to have increased, at least in Germany.

This rise is attributed to the previously mentioned general decline of the freedom of the press and an increase in displacements worldwide.

Research focus

A clear definition of independent media in exile and an elaborated explanation of recent trends in the media development sector are essential to understand the challenges that exiled media face. We indeed assume that the lack of established definitions also reflects a lack of research on the status of independent media in exile. To address this gap in academic research, we were tasked by the media development NGO Free Press Unlimited (FPU) to research the current status of independent media in exile and the challenges that they face. Free Press Unlimited's mission is based on supporting the right to independent information (FPU, n.d.), and the support of independent media in exile is aligned with the commitment. Nevertheless, the development of a long-term and strategic plan in this regard is hindered by a lack of up-to-date data on the current status of exiled media. Ruth Kronenburg, the FPU Director of Operations, pointed out the need for a report summarising such data. We therefore aim to update the previously mentioned report "Independent Media in Exile" written by Bill Ristow for the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) in 2011. One decade after the publication of one of the most comprehensive reports on the status of independent media in exile, we aim to understand how the identity of independent media in exile and the issue towards which they are confronted have evolved. Therefore, our research is guided by the research question: *what are the main challenges faced by independent media in exile in the world, and how can they be addressed?*

Besides the characteristics and challenges shared by most exiled media, this study also aims to outline the factors impacting journalists' different situations. We, for instance, examine how one's inclusion in a media outlet, compared to one's status as a freelancer, may impact networking possibilities and funding status. Still, we must stress that we balance generalisations with the recognition that the journalists who participated in this research present different personal stories, face different issues as exiled media and hold different projects for the future.

II. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research was conducted for Free Press Unlimited between February and June 2021. To understand what challenges independent media in exile face today, we organised

semi-structured interviews and designed a Qualtrics survey. In total, we could reach fifteen participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted with journalists in exile, but also with journalists working in exile media outlets who did not flee their country. Additionally, a small share of the interviews were scheduled with media development actors who provided engaging perspectives on the challenges that exile media face today.

Previous reports on independent media in exile were crucial to finding journalists who could share their experiences. Gradually, we could employ a 'snowball sampling method' through the interviewees' contacts, and gain insights from as many journalists as possible. We would also like to thank Free Press Unlimited for contacting their partners and acquaintances in the media development sector. Their help was crucial in establishing a list of potential interviewees. Throughout the research, we aimed at discussing with individuals from different genders, nationalities and professional backgrounds. While some participants wish to remain anonymous, others want to share their stories publicly, although sensitive information for some of them was anonymised. While we aim at providing an overview of the main issues that independent media in exile face, we would still like to emphasise that the in-depth interviews enabled us to listen to stories that are always personal. We would therefore like to present nuanced findings regarding the issues that journalists in exile and media outlets in exile face.

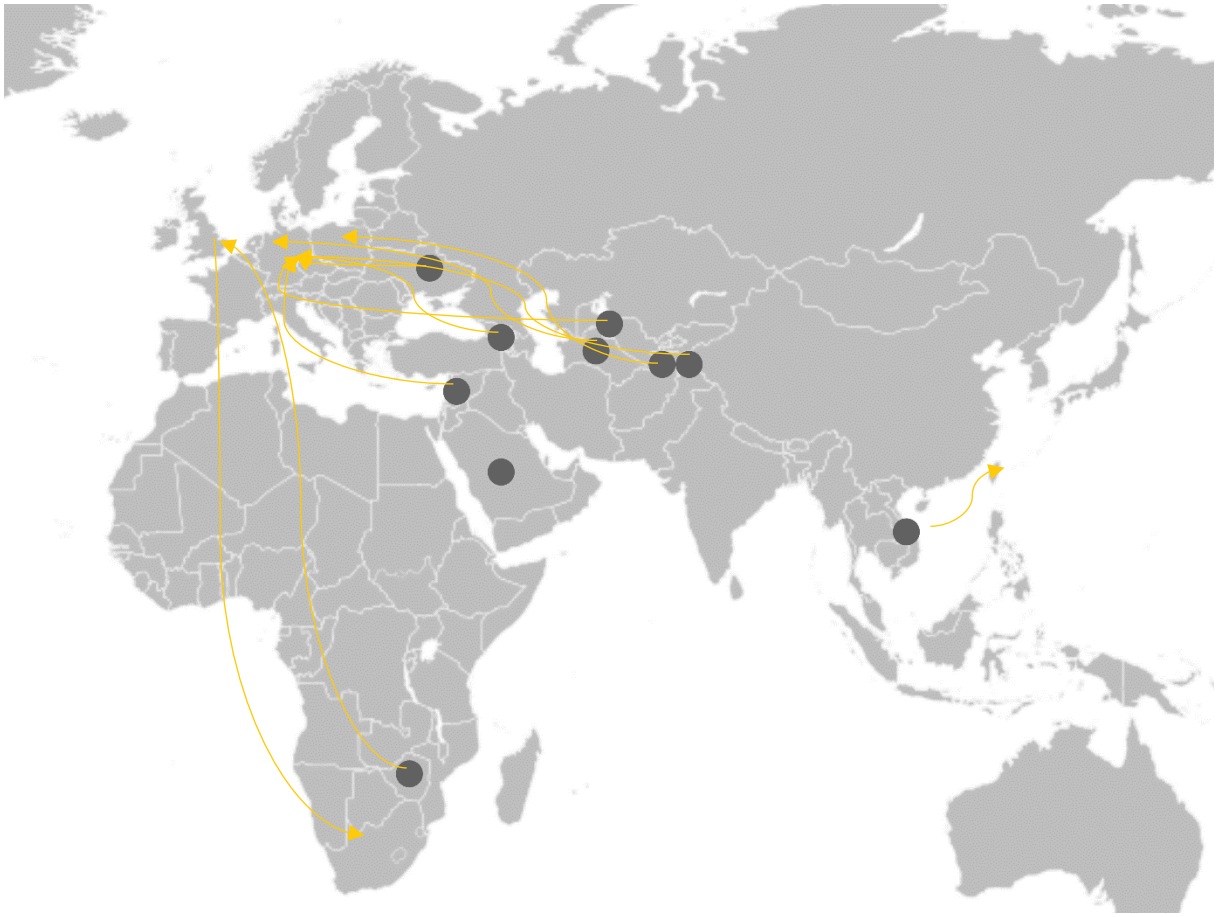

Figure 1 Map of the participants' home countries and direction of their move to exile.

In the first phase of this research, we conducted extensive literature review in order to understand the main challenges of independent media in exile that were recurrent among different studies. In the second phase of the study, a survey questionnaire was designed and structured following previous reports' findings on the topic. At the same time, we started to contact different journalists and media development actors who could share their insights. When possible, we scheduled semi-structured interviews on Zoom that would approximately last 1h30. We aimed to discuss the themes highlighted in previous reports, but also wished to dedicate a part of the interview to other issues that participants could raise or insights they wanted to share. Finally, we would like to use this report to highlight several solutions that journalists proposed during the interviews.

When given permission by participants, we recorded the interviews to transcribe them later and listen to them again. In case that the participant preferred not to be recorded, we took notes. After this data collection phase, we analysed the surveys and interviews through manual, thematic coding. After transcribing interviews, we could gradually establish recurrent key themes and sub-themes and find an answer to our research question. Finally, a draft of the

research report was sent to the journalists interviewed to ensure that we had interpreted their experience accurately and that we would not publish any information jeopardising their security.

III. CHALLENGES OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN EXILE

Figure 2 Categories of challenges

1. Insecurity

Our research highlights that the insecurity of exiled journalists is a prevalent issue among all interviewees, even after having left their home country. As previously explained, different forms of insecurity -threats against them or their family, harassment, lack of support from editorial lines- seem to be prevalent reasons for journalists to leave their country. Wilf

Mbanga, a Zimbabwean journalist and the founding Managing Director of the newspaper *Daily News*, was constantly harassed and even faced a six-month trial. While he was found not guilty, he would still be regularly followed in the streets, as a means to intimidate him. In a similar vein, Aleksei Bobrovnikov, a journalist from Ukraine, shares that some of the evidence was destroyed by law enforcement authorities when he started reporting on misconducts within the Ukrainian military. Throughout the process, he would also receive many death threats.

Humayra Bakhtiyar, a journalist who wrote mostly political analyses and investigations on political issues and corruption in Tajikistan, also became gradually harassed by government authorities. She states that intelligence services would threaten her and her family to discourage her from investigating. In the same period, she would also become a victim of 'trolling campaigns', which seemed to be run by individuals paid by the authorities to harass online individuals who are critical of the regime. In 2015, she became a victim of a kidnapping attempt, after which she had to hide for four weeks in her friend's house. Kamal Chomani experienced similar forms of insecurity. He became a target of intensifying attacks in 2017, in the context of a referendum on the autonomy of the Kurdistan region that he had criticised. The situation was gradually worsening to the point when he would receive death threats regularly, mostly on social media. Finally, Safa Al Ahmad left her home country without knowing that she will not be able to return in the near future. She left Saudi Arabia to edit a documentary film for the BBC on an uprising in the country. Only after she left did the Saudi embassy send an official complaint letter to the BBC listing all the offences that she was allegedly supposed to commit. The journalist explains that Saudi Arabia has many laws criminalising journalism but that the authorities do not always decide to enforce them. While she knew that her work on the film "was a gamble", she hoped that she would be able to finish the work and come back safely. When she had received the letter, it became clear that this was not the case: "I could technically go back to Saudi Arabia, but I am not quite sure if I could leave again. Besides that, everybody who was in the film is either dead, or in prisons, or executed." She has not gone to Saudi Arabia since 2014.

These stories show similarities in journalists' experiences with insecurity. Most of them follow the pattern of gradual harassment that becomes life-threatening. For journalists who used to work for a media outlet inside the country, the loss of support from their editorial lines seems to be the first step in their ostracisation from the media landscape. When Humayra Bakhtiyar temporarily returned to her home country, she learned that she had been dismissed: the media outlet where she was employed was threatened to be closed by the

authorities if she continued working there. This followed a long period of requests from the owner of the medium to stop covering political issues. Aleksei Bobrovnikov, too, was requested by his boss to stop investigating after his inquiries could compromise individuals with influence on the media outlet. After a long period of death threats and constant following, he was ultimately fired after he publicly opposed the outlet's proposal to decorate of suspects in the case that he was investigating.

The journalists' stories also exemplify the role that various NGOs, as well as other institutions can have in the initial help provided to the journalists. While a Dutch NGO invited Wilf Mbanga to stay a year in the Netherlands, Bobrovnikov could benefit from the support of a German human rights organisation to go to Germany. Similarly, Bakhtiyar could first benefit from an internship at the Deutsche Welle before returning to her home country. After she was forced to leave Tajikistan again without the short-term prospect of returning, she was put in touch with the Hamburg Stiftung for Politically Persecuted People and could go to Germany.

Physical Insecurity after Exile

Several journalists explain that the confrontation to physical insecurity continues to occur even after they leave for exile. As Wilf Mbanga explains: "harassment takes many forms." Frequently, the tactic is to harass family members and friends who remained in the home country. Muhamadjon Kabirov explains that a member of his family recently received an enormously high fine by the traffic police for a minor driving offence. Intelligence services pressured another member of his family to persuade the journalist to return; he was told to be a "traitor of the nation". As he interprets: "the government uses any chances, any opportunity to target us". Humayra Bakhtiyar's experience shows similar intimidation attempts. She was repeatedly asked to return to her home country and promised to be offered a job there. When she refused, knowing that she would not be able to do independent journalism inside the country, they pressured her family to persuade her to return. The journalist was even told that members of her family would be arrested if she didn't return. While she faced a dilemma, she ultimately decided to stay, knowing that returning would not ensure her security or that of her family.

For some interviewees, harassment can also perpetuate the physical insecurity within the country of exile. "Living in exile doesn't mean [being] safe. I have to keep my office and home addresses confidential to almost everyone," notes Trịnh Hữu Long. Several participants mention harassment and intimidation from people from their home countries, which act as

'exiled journalists'. Bakhtiyar calls them "wrong exiles". The journalist explains that these journalists asked to meet her in Germany under the pretext of spending time together. She never accepted. Bakhtiyar does not mention the city where she lives now and remains careful about sharing information that could threaten her security today. Her experience seems to be similar to that of Kabirov, who states that immigrants coming from the same region as he does surveilled him and his team after exile: "We found out that we are under surveillance from some [...] faces similar to ours. [...] they were chasing us. We were forced to change our office [...]". He shares his fear of being attacked when returning home during the night. He also explains that he had to change where he lived, as his wife was followed twice. Likewise, Mbanga reports on being notified by the police in the United Kingdom about a potential physical threat: "The police approached me once and said that they had picked up intelligence that the government was trying to harm me in the UK. They offered me protection.". He adds: "it is a serious problem that our governments will pursue you even if you are outside the borders." This fear of the government attacking journalists even outside of one's country is also shared by Safa Al Ahmad. The journalist survived a kidnapping attempt the last time she visited Yemen to cover the war there. She adds that this experience was rather specific due to Saudi Arabia's involvement in the war. Still, she does not feel safe even outside the region:

> "It is hard to rationalize your physical exposure. For example, Jamal [Khashoggi][1] knew that he was in danger. Yet, he did not have the imagination that this would happen to him in the Saudi consulate. Really, none of us did. [...] It is hard to logically think about what your safety is, how paranoid you should be or whether you can be too paranoid."

1 Saudi journalist assassinated at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on 3rd June 2018 by two agents of the Saudi government (UN OHCHR, 2019)

Al Ahmad tries to minimize the danger, for example, by avoiding transits through Arabic countries. Despite that, the feeling of insecurity prevails. Interestingly, Worrall (2019) finds that physical insecurity is particularly prevalent when the exile media outlet is based near the home country's border. Ines Gakiza works at *Radio Publique Africaine*, a Burundian exile media based in Rwanda. However, Gakiza does not mention feeling physically insecure ever since exile. However, the journalist also says that this feeling of security always depends on the country of exile.

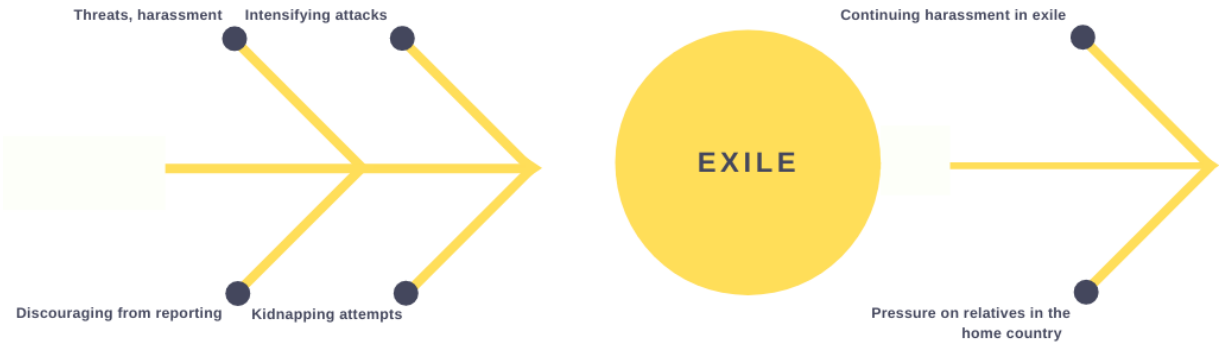

Figure 3: Confrontation to physical insecurity before and after leaving to exile.

Physical insecurity is also prevalent for media outlets that have the management based in exile but also reporters operating inside the country. This is the case of a media outlet from the Caucasus region who's in-country reporters confront two types of threats to their physical security. Firstly, the journalists experience police violence and detentions. Secondly, there are social media attacks with a potential overlap with offline reality. The participant described an occasion when photos of their in-country reporters were shared on social media calling other users to attack these reporters if they saw them. The participant notes that if the journalists were in the same country as the media outlet operates, it would be easier to protect them.

Digital Insecurity

While not all participants felt threatened since exile, all of them have been confronted with digital insecurity. This confirms Worrall's (2019) findings, which distinguishes journalists' physical insecurity from the digital one. It seems that the digitalisation of news has enabled new, more pervasive forms of censorship, surveillance and online harassment. While some participants witnessed their news websites being censored, other interviewees' emails were hacked, and others noticed communication interference. This section discusses participants' experiences of hacking and online harassment.

A frequent confrontation to digital insecurity is cyber-attacks, such as denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on media outlets' websites or phishing attacks. A majority of the interviewees have experienced those attempts, whether successful or not, several times or even regularly. One participant explains that the media outlet's website in which he works has been confronted with three major hacks over the last years. They were able to identify what exactly happened in the first two of them and implement corresponding technical measures. Yet, it remains unclear what exactly happened during the last attack, which hinders the opportunity for improvement. Besides direct attempts at hacking the media website, several participants also mention that they regularly receive fraudulent links via email aimed at hacking one's email address or news website. Galima Bukharbaeva, former editor-in-chief of the exiled media outlet *Uznews.net*, explains that the outlet closed in 2014 due to hackers' attacks on her email. Once they could access her account, they "downloaded the whole content and published it online, exposing by that all undercover reporters in Uzbekistan".

There is no major strategy among the participants to counter those cyber-attacks and cyber-surveillance attempts. While one finds it necessary to use two-factor authentication, another commits to changing passwords regularly. This contrasts with Ramos' (2016) worldwide survey among journalists' use of tools to ensure their digital security. He finds that

journalists primarily use digital tools to protect their communications (e.g. encryption for telephone calls, emails and chats). Journalists often use “encrypted web-based services” like Riseup and Hushmail and providers of PGP encryption for email (Ramos, 2016, p.4). The other widely used strategy is to store and securely share files to prevent intrusion in one’s activities, for which most participants use TrueCrypt. However, the survey also highlights that a significant proportion of participants experienced a moment when they felt unequipped to be digitally protected. The digital tools described as lacking in fact existed; journalists just weren’t aware of them.

The media outlets that were hacked often seem to improve the security of their websites after such attacks and gradually implement more secure news distribution platforms and communication channels. As one of our participants explains, the website now has a robust digital security policy and hosting provider, which improved their resistance to such attempts. Ines Gakiza shows how damaging these attacks are. Following at least three hacks on the website of *Radio Publique Africaine* after their exile in Rwanda, the team had to rebuild the website completely. Ever since, the website is more secure, and they have faced no more hacking attempts.

While exile media seem to improve security strategies after such attacks, it seems to be challenging to prevent the issue from occurring. Moreover, websites and social media are often the only means to maintain one’s relation with the audience. Eric Johnson interprets governments’ growing power to compromise freedom of speech. He states that around the mid-2010s, “governments started to fight back [...] they did a better job censoring, they did a better job cyber compromising their adversaries.” Podesta (2015) further notes that the devices to trace digital communications have become increasingly complex, a trend perceived even in democratic societies. The scholar further highlights the crucial role - for better and for worse - that companies like Facebook and Google have in sharing such data, impacting the “privacy of communications” and the “freedom of expression” of journalists in the world (Podesta, 2015, p. 7).

To address attempts at hacking or surveillance, some of the participants have attended trainings on digital security that their donors or NGOs with which they cooperated often offered. Gakiza for instance states that all team members of her media outlet benefitted from the trainings of several NGOs to protect themselves against digital security threats. Nevertheless, Johnson, who nowadays focuses on digital security in media, believes that the current formats of these trainings are insufficient. He argues for a more proactive approach to the media development sector, stating that “there is less of a need of training, by now most of

the people have been trained." From his experience, various workshops or resource guides may inform the journalists but do not lead to the actual implementation of the measures. He therefore calls for a more "hand-holding approach" such as using status-tracking apps monitoring whether two-factor authentication is turned on or if password managers and hard-drive encryptions are used.

Such "digital hygiene" strategies (Podesta, 2015, p.14) seem to be particularly important in a decade where there is no need to intercept private communications to trace individuals' activities. Indeed, apps on smartphones already detain information of possessors (e.g. from where activities on the smartphone take place), and social media also reveal crucial information on one's ideas or circles of friends (Podesta, 2015). Moreover, in the information age, any facial recognition software can detect which persons were present at a specific protest. Still, voices are rising against these practices, and several initiatives show promising pathways out of surveillance. To illustrate, the scholar mentions the Open Technology Fund (part of Radio Free Asia), which promotes the expansion of portable and safe communications technology and platforms to enhance journalists' security and their sources.

Online harassment

It seems that attempts at silencing exiled journalists' voices frequently take the form of attacks directed at their person. Several journalists have experienced online harassment through trolling campaigns, systematic hateful commenting under their posts, but also fake news campaigns targeted at their person. When Ines Gakiza received a prize in 2016 rewarding the freedom of speech, she also received backlash reactions under the post announcing this price. Facing similar difficulties, Amloud Alamir, a journalist at *Amal, Berlin!* says that sometimes it can be challenging to distinguish freedom of speech from hate speech, although she notes that such difficulty is not specific to journalists in exile. Humayra Bakhtiyar and Muhamadjon Kabirov further denounce trolling campaigns aimed to intimidate them and dissuade them from continuing their work. While Twitter and Facebook are necessary to reach the home country and international audience, social media also incentivises hateful comments. Bakhtiyar explains that she will immediately be attacked when she publishes an article for a Tajik exile media. Those comments are highly intimidating, such as calls on sending her to ISIS as a sex worker. The potential backlash that she might receive comes to her mind every time that she is supposed to write an article. This online harassment has persisted ever since 2013, even before leaving her home country. The journalist adds that

"as active societies, we should find ways to make it stop." Kabirov further says: "They will curse you, they will harass you, they will call you a traitor of the nation." He illustrates:

> "Recently, there was a conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at the border. I started covering this news on Facebook. That programme had 60 000 viewers, but then I saw there were 200 comments which, all of them, were cursing me and threatening me, my family, my wife."

Moreover, several interviewees have also been victims of the spread of false information about them. Wilf Mbanga explains:

> "They continue to harass us. I get stories written by the government media in Zimbabwe to this day, denouncing me and writing rubbish about my life. They want to delegitimise you. [...] You just have to ignore them, carry on with your life and write about what you believe in."

Bakhtiyar further shares her experience of her phone, email and a social media account being hacked, and personal chats published online. It seems that female participants are more prone to be victims of sexist attacks. Indeed, Bakhtiyar experienced massive online harassment when fake photos and audio-visual materials with her face photoshopped were published online. Galima Bukharbaeva has experienced similar harassment.

While the interviewees have different experiences with such harassment, the latter seems more difficult to handle than hacking attempts. Reflecting on regular hacking attempts, one of our participants states: "Digital security is something that rarely exists in this world, you just have to get used to that." But while discussing online harassment, another interviewee mentions: "everyone who gets online harassment needs special moral support [...] it breaks people."

Digital insecurity is a significant issue for independent media in exile as it brings a large amount of additional stress and also pressure in terms of time- and financial resources. "Digitals are very expensive. [...] Our website costs so much more in order to be secure." explains one interviewee. The participant notes that although donors have recently increased their support in this regard, it remains insufficient. Safa Al Ahmad also stresses that the demands on journalists regarding digital security are enormous, mentioning both its expensive and time-consuming aspects. Moreover, she points out the tensions between digital security and the pressure to be active on social media that freelance journalists experience:

> "I am required, as a journalist, to be diligent about my digital security. Yet, I am also required to be constantly active on social media [...] There is no way that you can say that I am 100 % secure. It is impossible."

Despite the confrontation to physical and digital insecurity, several participants explain that they refuse to engage in self-censorship. Instead, for some, these attacks seem to have fostered an even stronger commitment to denouncing abuses of power and showing authorities who tried to silence them that intimidation will not prevent them from continuing to do their work. Aleksei Bobrovnikov, who is currently writing a non-fiction book integrating several inquiries, states that he would never silence his opinions or stop his investigations: "I wanted to show them that this was only the beginning." Humayra Bakhtiyar further explains wishing to continue defending important positions and showing the authorities that their intimidation techniques will never work.

2. Funding Inconsistency

Financial sustainability or funding in general seems to be the primary and persistent challenge for independent media in exile. All of the participants highlighted this, and their experience corresponds to the findings of existing literature (Fojo, 2013; Foster, 2019; Cook, 2016). Financing and its sustainability are identified as one of the critical challenges for independent exiled media in Ristow's (2011) CIMA report. According to the report, funding for independent media in exile is inconsistent and insufficient. The interviews conducted show that this remains the same up to today, although some circumstances regarding funding have changed. As for other challenges, this financial issue depends on different factors. As Eric Jonson notes: "every journalist, donor but also country is different." The problem of funding seems to be experienced slightly differently by freelance exiled journalists compared to those who are part of a media outlet. Some of the participants who work as freelance journalists have received scholarships that provided them with some income in the first months after leaving to exile and allow them to start looking for professional opportunities in exile. Bakhtiyar, Bobrovnikov and Chomani all received scholarships from the Hamburg Stiftung for Politically Persecuted People. Bobrovnikov has subsequently become a scholar of the German PEN Center as part of the Writers-in-Exile Programme. Safa Al Ahmad notes that support in the form of scholarships, fellowships or residencies is beneficial. However, she also points out that we should spread more awareness on those opportunities in order to make

them more accessible, as she has only learned about such funding possibilities recently. Besides the individual scholarships for freelance journalists, the main source of income for most independent media in exile comes from donors.

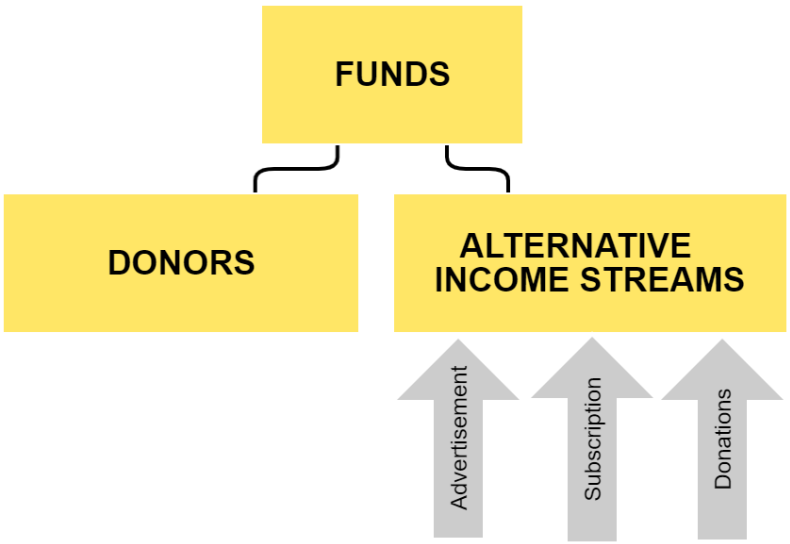

Figure 4: Funding scheme according to literature

Donor Funding

Donor funds are crucial for independent media in exile. They constitute the primary source of income for all of the participants. According to Mbanga, donors' funds consist of approximately 80 % of all the income of *The Zimbabwean* and for *Amal, Berlin!* it is the "absolute majority", following Alamir's words. Ines Gakiza's media outlet relies exclusively on donors, which is in stark contrast to the revenue model of the outlet before exile. In the home country, the media outlet diversified the revenue stream, for instance through advertising and sponsored pages. These findings are in line with other literature. For example, in the study conducted by Fojo (2013), half of the participating exile media organisations relied exclusively on donor funding. Myers and Juma (2018), who analysed media development flows based on data from several sources, found that between 2010 and 2015, the five biggest funders of media support in general were Germany, the United States, Japan, the United Kingdom and Sweden. Moreover, the biggest proportion of the support is targeted at news production. Cook (2016) noted that media development assistance flows through various actors, ranging from aid agencies and international organisations to private foundations and different philanthropic bodies. Yet, there is a lack of data on what proportion of the aid recipients consists of exiled media.

The participants identified other challenges associated with donor funding. Firstly, access to funds can be difficult. This can be especially the case for new media outlets that do not have many contacts and, as Kabirov states: “it takes some time to build trust of the donors.” Toufic El Masri from Körber-Stiftung also stresses that reaching the funds can be complicated and could be improved. He highlights that the access is especially complicated for freelance journalists in exile. Secondly, even when the media receive the funding, there are extensive requirements on reporting and other administrative procedures, which place heavy burdens on the media. This challenge was already identified by Cook (2016). The third significant challenge is the inconsistency of donors' funding, largely caused by the short-term duration of the funds, which forces the media to search for new ones constantly. As Mbanga explains, instead of the one or two years of funding support from donors, he would have preferred to spread the amount of the fund over a more extended period of time. Other participants also confirmed that the time constraints on funds hinder the ability of the media to develop their activities. Another factor mentioned by the participants which contributes to such inconsistency is that the funds from donors are frequently targeted at specific projects only. As Gakiza shares: “we present projects and we defend them, and then they accept to fund these projects. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.” The inconsistency of the donor’s funds was also pointed out by Foster (2019). Her findings draw attention to the consequences of short-term and specific outcome-oriented funds, mainly the inability to keep reserve funds or invest in developing new funding solutions.

Turkmen.news raises one more challenge regarding donor funding: “The sole source of income (grants) is sustainable until Turkmenistan is in their focus. Once it falls out of the priority countries list, donors will stop funding us. This has already happened with the Soros Foundation.” Indeed, according to several participants, donors tend to shift their attention and funds to places where an abrupt crisis situation (such as a conflict) emerges. The change of focus to specific regions or even countries (several participants mentioned donors’ interest in Syria as an example) is accompanied by decreased support for media targeting different countries. Yet, as the participants stress, the absence of war, relatively stable economic situation, or seemingly improving political situation of their countries do not mean that exiled media can safely return to the country and resume independent reporting. This issue has not been raised explicitly in the reviewed literature. Still, it could be linked to the observation that the priorities of donors and the exiled media are not necessarily identical (Foster, 2019). This leads to the last identified challenge. Although none of the participants reported that they would feel pressured to push a specific agenda in their content to secure the funding, one

participant expressed discontent over certain "indirect indications about redlines on what is possible to write" to keep benefitting from funding. Indeed, those exiled media who have diversified portfolios of donors or revenue streams in general are less prone to falling into a "grand dependency cycle" (Cook, 2016, p. 10). In turn, this can help them preventing uncomfortable perceptions of limits on editorial freedom.

Several participants propose solutions to address these issues related to donor funding. As many interviewees note, extensive administrative procedures accompany both application for and use of donors' funds, which can be particularly challenging for new and smaller media. To improve their access to the funds, one participant suggests training on the application and reporting procedures. Eric Johnson instead stresses the need for the media to diversify the income streams from donors and become more flexible in responding to the donors' priorities. For example, if a donor supports projects spreading awareness about health-related issues, a media outlet may try to incorporate health-related topics into its content. Participants who share having diversified donors' funds perceive diversification as a significant advantage.

Johnson further suggests that the exiled media should more actively approach entrepreneurs and other people with sufficient financial resources who come from the home country of the exiled media. Still, even though some of the participants consider this a possibility, they also raise several objections. Bobrovnikov draws attention to the danger of persons pursuing their own political or business agenda through the media. Another journalist describes how a wealthy entrepreneur approached their media outlet with an offer of significant financial support but also implied that he would like to maintain certain influence over the editorial decisions. The participant further notes that even when there is no such intention, the media outlet partly uses its reputation when they receive resources from influential people from business. Other interviewees point out that these people may not even be willing to offer their support as they can be afraid of the consequences from the government's side. A final, more general suggestion raised by several participants is to make the issues of exiled media more visible, which could attract new donors and encourage the current ones in maintaining support.

Alternative Income Streams

As Wilf Mbanga notes, independent media in exile form "a bad business model." They cannot fully participate neither in the market of the country of exile, nor the one of the home country. Thus, external support from donors is essential. Yet, commercial means can yield part of the

income. Those either use advertisement or the media have to, as Johnson describes it, “go down to the consumer.” The main alternative income stream used by the participants is advertisement, for example in the form of Google Ads or sponsored pages. Advertisement can provide the media with a more long-term financial stream. However, the journalists interviewed raise several issues. Firstly, some participants mention that advertisers in the home country are afraid of the consequences from the government's side. Foster (2017), too, found that some brand advertisers are avoiding independent media covering happenings in repressive regimes as they want the ads to be presented in a ‘neutral environment’. Secondly, the content targeted on the audience in the home countries is often not in English, which makes the income from advertisement much lower, as Kabirov notes. Moreover, as Foster (2017) further explains, independent media, including those in exile, are often small organisations lacking people focusing exclusively on communication with advertisers, which makes higher profit unlikely.

Besides advertisement, the alternative income streams may include subscription, crowdfunding, micro-donations and micro-payments. Those streams are also identified by Bittner (2019), who explored available business models in the age of digital journalism. Subscription would, according to Johnson, also provide the journalists with a more long-term and stable income. He also draws attention to new platforms, like Substack, which easily enables journalists to start a subscription newsletter.

Yet, the main obstacle is often that the targeted audience cannot pay for the content. The main reason is that the audience frequently lacks the necessary financial resources even to secure their living situation. This is a point raised by Mbanga concerning Zimbabwe, as well as by Gakiza regarding Burundi’s audience. Alamir further stresses that the content of outlets like *Amal, Berlin!* should be available for free to truly help the targeted audience. Secondly, as Mbanga notes, there are always media alternatives for free, and thus the introduction of the subscription would put them at a competitive disadvantage. Another participant shared this view; he explains that there is little of paying for media content in the home country of their outlet. Therefore, introducing a paywall would not encourage people to buy subscriptions but instead would hinder the achievement of their primary goal: to provide people with an alternative voice to the media affiliated with the government. The study by Foster (2019) supports those findings by pointing out that there is a very small share of the audience that can be targeted with subscriptions or sales.

Next to subscription, there are other forms of contribution from the readers. Eric Johnson suggests crowdfunding campaigns in the home country and illustrates their potential

by describing how Alexei Navalny and his team obtained support from their audience. Yet, as one of our participants stresses, each outlet's situation is specific, and the potential of crowdfunding campaigns can differ significantly depending on a specific country. For example, their media outlet has tried to launch a crowdfunding campaign, but the expenses spent on running the campaign were eventually higher than what they collected. However, for some exile media, the focus on donations from readers can be more promising. Trịnh Hữu Long notes that "[our outlet] wants to make readers' donations the majority of our income because that would improve our financial stability and content quality." His outlet targets mainly "white-collar professionals" as well as internationals residing in Vietnam.

Another journalist discusses micropayments as a source of income – a type of sales when a small fee is withdrawn from a reader for their access to one article, video, etc. Bittner's (2019) report already discusses the plausibility of the methods mentioned above for financing digital journalism in general. Yet, in the case of exiled media, there are additional barriers to consider. The author highlights the first significant obstacle in enabling the audience to contribute financially; the absence of the required technical infrastructure. "There are a lot of readers who want to contribute, however, we don't have a banking system. Kurdistan is completely a cash country," confirms Kamal Chomani. The second obstacle is rather technical and is linked to the traceability of the contribution. As Johnson explains, micro-payments or crowdfunding campaigns can be potentially dangerous if it is possible to track them back to the contributor. Secure payment gateways were already identified as necessary for developing revenue from alternative streams by participants in a study led by Foster (2019).

3. Reaching Audiences and Sources

The participants target different types of audiences, and some of them even multiple (or plan to do so in the future). The discussed target groups include, among others, audience in the home country, regional and international audience, as well as the audience in the country of exile. Previous reports similarly identify several types of audiences. Foster (2019) distinguishes the in-country (home country) audience from diaspora and donors. Schönert (2019) focuses on exiled journalists in Germany and differentiates three types of exiled media projects that target three different audiences: audience in the home country, refugees from the home countries now living in Germany, and German audience.

Regarding the diaspora audience, the media can specifically target people in the same country of exile as they are based. This is the case of *Amal, Berlin!* which produces content for the refugee community in Germany, or Berlin specifically and provides them with relevant information in their native language (*Amal, Berlin!* publishes content in Arabic and Farsi/Dari). As Amloud Alamir explains, they provide the community with important information which might be otherwise difficult to reach due to, for example, the language barrier.

Nevertheless, media outlets aiming to reach a diaspora audience are a minority. Indeed, the principal target audience are the nationals of the home countries. The participants stress the lack of free press in their countries and thus the prevailing need to keep providing their fellow citizens with independent information. When asked if there is a specific focus on certain groups within the home country audience, Chomani replies that "[t]here is a lot of conflict in Kurdistan at the moment, and whenever we were writing about it, we were trying to build bridges […] to somehow target all groups in the society." He further mentions their attempts to engage the youth and help them make better sense of the current political dynamics in the country. Despite the broad focus, several participants mention that the dominant group, according to their available data, consists of a male audience, from young to middle age. Yet, they also point out that these data can be partly skewed by the female audience using social media accounts of their male relatives.

Therefore, it seems that the international audience mainly represents a means to inform and raise awareness among the international community on what is going on inside their home countries. The participant representing the media outlet *Turkmen.news* notes: "Turkmenistan is not a country of great interest for the international community, but we believe that we reach out to all international stakeholders we need." He further specifies that those stakeholders include governments, human rights groups or international financial institutions. Freelance journalists highlight the role of social media in the international reach. For example, Humayra Bakhtiyar and Kamal Chomani are both using Twitter to spread their work in English. Muhamadjon Kabirov thinks about targeting an international audience more by publishing content, firstly, in Russian, and in a long-term perspective also in English.

Safa Al Ahmad raises the broader ramifications of targeting an international audience and finds it frustrating when cooperating with 'mainstream media' outlets which publish in English. She points to the observation that despite the label 'international', this audience frequently consists of a "western, white and English-speaking audience" only, instead of a truly global one. She feels that this impacts the expectations about her journalism product, and

eventually, she internalises those expectations herself. Such pressures emerge especially when she decides, as a freelance journalist, to cooperate with mainstream English-speaking media. According to Al Ahmad, they may impact the choices made about what to report on: “What are the stories that I can pitch to my white commission editor so I can continue doing this work?” She illustrates it with a concrete example: “for a long time, I could not have done a [documentary] film on Saudi Arabia that was not about women not being able to drive. That was the only film anybody was interested in.” However, the audience’s expectations also influence the way her journalistic work is created and received: “I lose my voice, eventually. I do myself, I edit my work to that point when I am considered professional and objective to them and I lose my voice through that." She believes that those challenges intensify when being in exile. A larger body of theoretical literature further discusses experiences similar to hers (see e.g. Fitzgerald, 2018).

The limiting expectations on the topics covered by exiled journalists are also raised by Toufic El Masri, a Programme Director at Körber-Stiftung. He specifically discusses cases when the audience is the population in the country of exile and is not part of the diaspora. The journalists are then frequently expected to cover migration or the political situation in their country. Yet, as El Masri notes, many journalists may have a different specialisation that they would further like to focus on. However, the competitiveness of the mainstream media market in the countries of exile makes this often hardly possible.

Means of Reaching the Audience and Challenges

The digitalisation process arguably profoundly changed the channels through which the media reach their audiences. As the following remarks show, it seems that the diversification of channels to diffuse news is crucial to target specific audiences and overcome attempts at blocking the free flow of information. All of our participants use channels available on the Internet to reach their audience. While *The Zimbabwean* used to be printed and distributed in physical form for many years, gradually reaching up to 200 000 copies for an issue, the newspaper now has fully moved online and publishes a digital edition. Most of the participants also use multiple channels. According to Muhamadjon Kabirov, people nowadays prefer audio or audio-visual content. That is why his media outlet *Azda.tv* mainly uses YouTube to spread its content instead of written articles. They also have a website and use Facebook, Telegram, Instagram and a Russian-language social media site *OK.ru*. Kabirov mentions that Instagram seems to be especially effective in reaching younger audiences, while *OK.ru* might be problematic regarding the possibility of censorship. Yet, their YouTube

channel with approximately 80 000 subscribers (by the time of writing this report) has the widest reach among all of those platforms. *Amal, Berlin!* has their own website and is also present on various social media, which are according to Alamir very important in keeping in touch with their targeted audience in Germany, as well as with the community in their home countries. *Amal, Berlin!* is present on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. She further notes that Facebook is especially popular in the Middle East and Twitter is particularly important for the Gulf countries. The Facebook page of *Amal, Berlin!* has 88 000 followers (when writing this report). Similarly, Humayra Bakhtiyar also uses Facebook for the Tajik audience and Twitter for the English-speaking one.

The participants also point out the issues that they encounter while trying to reach their audience. The first issue, inherent to exiled journalism, is censorship; the content of independent exiled journalists is not welcome by the government or other groups in their home countries that try to hinder access to it. The website of the *Radio Publique Africaine* is blocked in Burundi, although some internet-knowledgeable individuals can still access it through a VPN. Gakiza explains that "fortunately, it is not the only platform that we use to diffuse [news]". The medium is active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and even WhatsApp to inform the public. *Azda.tv* also experiences government censorship directly, as the Tajik authorities are, according to Kabirov, restricting access to YouTube. As a freelancer, Safa Al Ahmad adds that the opportunity to target and reach an Arabic-speaking audience is restricted due to the nature of the regional media landscape. "The Arabic media scene is controlled by different governments. [...] So if you are in exile and are from Saudi Arabia or the Gulf, you have to choose a side." She is not publishing for Saudi media but also avoids working for Qatari outlets to stay independent and critical. The remaining options are limited: "there are only very few small independent outlets that operate inside the region and those are very fragile." Yet, she now tries to produce independently of mainstream media (both Arab- and English-speaking), even though the impact of her work is then much smaller. Other participants encounter similar obstacles.

The attempts of the governments to censor the online content of the exiled media is also raised by media development specialist Eric Johnson who has observed an intensification of this trend in the most recent years. These repressive tactics of governments (e.g. active blocking of users' access to media channels) had already been highlighted by a report by Foster (2019). Musgrave (2017) argues that those attempts give rise to alternative flows of information, the "dark social"; when links to specific articles are sent directly from one user to another via messenger apps or emails. Interestingly, some participants also have started to

innovate with what Musgrave (2017) calls 'dark socials', referring to the spreading of news and URL links to articles via private messengers, such as Telegram, Signal, Whatsapp but also email or text. Gakiza states that these apps have not only become means to reach sources, but are also platforms of diffusion; Whatsapp (and to a certain extent Signal) are very popular among the citizens in Burundi. Musgrave (2017) adds that in more repressive countries like Turkey or Russia, these apps constitute key sources of information.

The participants have some suggestions that would enable them to widen the audience reach Kabirov explains that the censorship attempts and the low Internet penetration could be addressed by launching a satellite TV channel of *Azda TV*. The news would then also be accessible to more people, as the Internet penetration is relatively low in Tajikistan. Kabirov further stresses the role of major internet companies, such as Facebook and Google, that could provide more opportunities on their platforms for exiled media and also focus, specifically in their case, on the Central Asian region. He gives the example of the news aggregating platform, such as Google News, that could help to widen their audience reach. Eric Johnson stresses that the proportion of the in-country population that follows independent exiled media must become larger. "What we need in most countries is just another reader, more consumers." Johnson notes that many other challenges, such as funding, will also improve if the media manage to attract new consumers.

It can be useful for the exiled media to actively monitor their audience reach to achieve those goals. Several reasons make monitoring crucial. Firstly, as Johnson stresses, the data are necessary to prove the impact of the media outlet or an individual journalist and thus secure financing from donors. Secondly, he also mentions the positive psychological element: knowing that one has followers and readers can help the journalists overcome the difficult times they face in exile and stay motivated. Thirdly, data can be used to target specific groups more effectively. For example, Kabirov mentions that they aim to focus more on Instagram as they know that a younger audience is present there. The importance of data analytics for targeting the right audience and potentially increasing advertisement revenue was also discussed in previous literature. Foster (2017) outlined the potential benefits such as increasing the proportion of female audience and regional cooperation or identifying the most effective practices and strategies.

The interviews also highlight potential challenges in monitoring the audience. As Johnson mentioned, if the media decide to use more secure anonymous technologies, the access to the data on their reach is limited. Musgrave (2017) adds that while 'dark socials' can become alternatives to the censored websites, they also make it more challenging to monitor

one's audience. Moreover, it remains difficult to know how media outlets can monetise these platforms. Finally, even these private messaging applications are not protected from government censorship, as several case studies show. Thus, Eric Johnson finds it necessary to develop a "proxy variable" that would prove the media's impact to their donors but would not endanger the anonymity of the audience. Although the most frequently used channels, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Telegram, allow for some measuring of the audience reach, the aggregate data from all channels can be inaccurate.

Sources and Communication:

Similar to reaching an audience that has restricted access to information, gaining access to reliable sources of information about happenings inside the home country is a difficult task that exile media have to face. "Am I being accurate? Am I describing things the way they are? Because I haven't been there for so long," says Safa Al Ahmad, before adding that the concerns over accuracy and credibility are not only "a big mental challenge" for exiled journalists but also a practical one: "you have to be more creative about how you think about your work, how you collect it, how you verify it". These concerns expressed by the participants correspond to findings of previous research (e.g. Foster, 2019). However, there have been significant changes in how exile media gain their information. Eric Johnson identifies work with sources as the most critical change in challenges faced by exiled media when compared to the situation a decade ago when Ristow's CIMA report (2011) was published. According to Johnson, it is crucial that sources can find and instantly reach the journalist, including ordinary people who have interesting content for the media.

The participants use multiple sources to reach information. For media outlets, the first option is to have reporters present in the country. Depending on the specific situation, those reporters can either be officially accredited or operate undercover. For example, the in-country reporters of *The Zimbabwean* are now registered as journalists and have the government permit. Otherwise, as Mbanga stresses, they would face criminalisation and arrest from the side of the government. Another participant said that their reporters are not advised to be open about their publisher, yet they leave the decision on the journalists themselves. The situation of the in-country reporters seems to be country-specific. Nevertheless, their targeting by the government authorities or other groups corresponds to the findings of previous literature (Tatomir, De Angelis & Sadouskaya-Komlach, 2020). Foster (2019) also raises the issue of economic risks linked to working with in-country reporters. It is more complicated to

pay them, remain fully transparent when accounting to donors and yet not compromise the security of those reporters.

The participants, both those representing media outlets and freelancers, also maintain contact with other people who stayed in the home country or other countries in the region. One journalist shares that the exile media outlet in which the interviewee works was a popular and trusted outlet before exile, and hence maintained a list of contacts who are regular sources of information. However, another participant mentions the severe security implications: "you become dangerous for other people to communicate with. I cannot ask just anybody to be interviewed because I have to worry about their safety," notes Al Ahmad. Another interviewee explains that it is often too risky to call sources directly. Instead, they attempt at reaching out -and being contacted- via more 'private' technologies. The security implications are an essential barrier to access information; several individuals in the home country are afraid to communicate their information, especially since the media outlet is considered as "the enemy of the country."

Another issue concerns the reliability and verification of the information. One participant uses his contacts within the government and political parties. Yet, the participant also notes that "with regard to the information, it is always difficult, and the reliability is also a big problem […] you can trust like 50 %." One thus needs to verify all the input carefully, and this can be challenging. Similarly, Ines Gakiza considers the lack of direct access to information a major issue that is very time-consuming: "It is a big challenge that we have to address every day in order to publish verified information." Al Ahmad also points out the problem:

> "The circle of people that you can talk to is smaller, so then you start outsourcing: okay, I know that they won't talk to me but maybe they could talk to this person and this person could verify this [...]"

Same as Gakiza, she adds that the fact-checking process is much more complicated and time-consuming. Moreover, as a freelancer, she does not have the institutional backing to gain more considerable credibility when contacting people and asking questions. Checking the reliability of news can become even harder, as noted by Kamal Chomani, because of the absence of public institutions that can provide access to verified data in some countries.

Sometimes, the audience of a specific news outlet interestingly also becomes its source of information. One participant, representing an outlet from the Caucasus region, distinguishes different types of information that they get from their audience. Some of them

are complaint-based and often involve social problems faced by the people. The media outlet then sends an investigator on the ground who verifies the information and potentially reports on that. Muhamadjon Kabirov also works with information sent directly by the audience and describes the verification process: when people approach them via social media with a video or a piece of information that is interesting, they first ask the people for more information and subsequently aim to verify it by trusted contacts that they know in the country and they also often contact local authorities to receive their statements, yet, usually without response. He also describes a case when *Azda.tv* reported on certain activity of Tajik local authorities and accompanied it with a video obtained with the author's permission. After *Azda.tv* published it, the local authorities found the author of the video and forced him to report the content on YouTube. The video was deleted and *Azda.tv* received a warning for violation of their privacy and ownership rights policy. After some negotiations with the media outlet, the author of the video eventually agreed to take his complaint to YouTube back. The attempts of governments to block media's accounts through a complaint on Facebook and YouTube were also experienced by participants in a study by Foster (2019).

These experiences illustrate the need for secure communication with sources. "How can a journalist solicit input from a source in a manner that secures the anonymity of the source in a [technologically] guaranteed way?" is, according to Eric Johnson, a crucial question nowadays. He is convinced that anonymous technologies provide the exiled journalists with a promising way forward. Firstly, journalists can make use of anonymous dropboxes, such as GlobaLeaks and SecureDrop. The sources can send the journalist a file and be sure that the journalist cannot be anyhow forced to reveal the identity of the source, as there is no technological way to do so. If the journalists need to communicate with their sources, they can use instant anonymous messengers, such as Session, Briar or Ricochet. The urgent need for more secure communication with the sources was also stressed by previous studies. For example, Ramos' (2016) survey revealed a general lack of awareness among journalists about the importance of those technologies and their specific features. One way to improve the communication with the sources is educating journalists on the active use of these technologies. However, Johnson also mentioned that there should be more innovative ways of proving the impact of those technologies (without compromising the users' anonymity) to donors to support their further development. Moreover, the accessibility of those instruments, especially of the dropboxes, could be improved, so that also smaller independent outlets and freelance journalists can use them easily.

4. Personal and Professional Challenges

Psycho-social Insecurity

It seems that the stress surrounding funding inconsistency and the permanent (online) attacks faced by journalists in exile contribute to the broader set of personal challenges. The participants discussed the consequences that exile entails: leaving their families and friends, isolation and struggles with integration to the new countries, but also the uncertainty over their professional future. When asked about the most important challenge that exile media face, Aleksei Bobrovnikov replies "the loss of social life." "Losing your life at home, basically [...] You switch from one type of living to something completely different.". Other participants share this perspective: "There you are someone, here you are no one," notes Kamal Chomani, when discussing the forced withdrawal from the professional and social environment in Kurdistan. Moreover, it does not facilitate things when several of them are considered as 'enemies of the nation'. At least three of the participants are listed as terrorists or extremists in their home countries or face opened criminal cases against them there. Muhamadjon Kabirov also explains how this affects his family: "your family will be under the target of the pro-government activists or people."

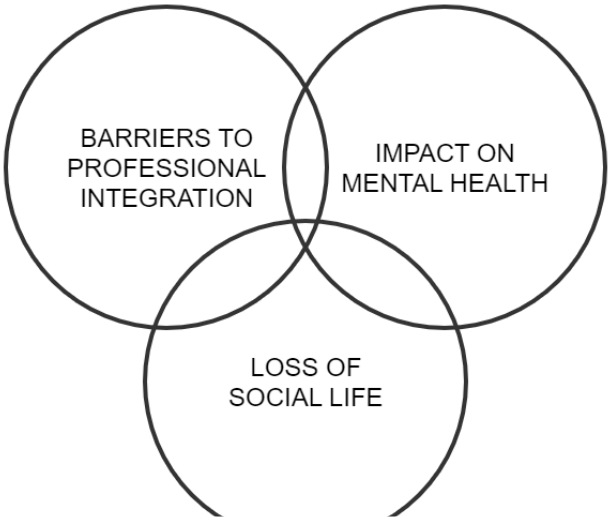

Figure 5: Personal and Professional Challenges

Many participants also point to the lack of ensuing available support during these difficult times. As Kabirov comments: "once you're active, you will spend your time, your energy, your nerves. But you don't have enough support, neither financial nor moral support from international organisations." Safa Al Ahmad also expands on the impact of all the challenges that she, as an exiled freelance journalist, faces: "if you are an exile, you don't

have a place to live, you don't have health insurance, you don't have any of these things, then you are a lot more exposed [...] to what you need to do to make ends means for you [...] and add to that you feel unsafe for very legitimate reasons." Similarly to Kabirov, she also points to the lack of financial support: "all these things have financial solutions, yet nobody provides it."

All these issues, often in combination with previous traumatic experiences and a sense of isolation, become sources of psychological distress. This finding is confirmed by Alice Worrall (2019). The circumstances accompanying exile journalism have indeed impacted some of our participants' mental health and their lack of access to necessary help. One of the participants has been diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): "I was very close to destroying my career at one point because I just couldn't function and there wasn't any help, and it just kept spiralling." Getting therapy proved to be very difficult. As a freelancer, the interviewee is unable to get appropriate health insurance and therefore applies for a grant to be able to pay for the therapy. Another participant experienced severe depression last year, making it impossible to work and also take care of the necessary bureaucratic matters regarding visa or even to pay the rent. The initial lack of access to help led to a spiral development resulting in losing the apartment in which the journalist lived, a halt of application to medical insurance and residency status problems. The journalist is currently undergoing therapy provided by an NGO, found a new place to stay with the help of a friend and works on recovery. Those experiences correspond to the findings of previous literature. For example, Foster (2019) notes that the journalists may experience isolation," feelings similar to survivor's guilt", as well as "losing valuable parts of their self-identity" (p. 23). All those experiences illustrate that part of the reality of exiled journalists is an increased exposure to psychological distress. Some of the contributing factors could be addressed by more accessible support.

The personal aspects of exile differ and influence the extent of isolation that the journalist may experience. While some journalists had to leave their countries alone, others were joined by their families. Similarly, the experience of exile differs for freelancers and those journalists who work with their colleagues in a media outlet. Worrall (2019) observes that isolation can worsen one's mental health. Several journalists for example mention that their relatives -and the participant's relationship with them- are impacted. One participant's family has asked the journalist to stop publishing several times, fearing the consequences both for the journalist and the rest of the family. The participant further describes the ongoing dilemma and feeling of guilt caused by the harassment that family and friends at home still

experience after exile. Aleksei Bobrovnikov in turn explains that several of his friends have been afraid to be associated with him. However, even the journalists who have fled with their family or partner remain in a difficult position. The child of one of the participants wishes to return to their home country but the security situation makes it impossible. Neither was the journalist allowed to say goodbye to a close family member who recently passed away.

How To Keep Your Voice

Besides the personal difficulties, there are also significant challenges regarding professional integration in the new country. All the participants stress that they risked their safety and eventually were forced to leave their countries as they wanted to preserve their independent voice. Therefore, it is important for them to continue their work and be heard in exile. “After all, when you won’t keep your voice, why should you stay in Germany?” asks Kamal Chomani, and other participants speak in a similar way. Moreover, most participants make clear that despite all the challenges they face, they “wouldn't do anything else.” However, it is challenging to continue journalism in a new country that often speaks with a different language, having few contacts in the local media sphere, and being deprived of the access to sources and audience in one’s home country. “I was deprived of the basic tools of a journalist which is the access to up-to-date information as an eye-witness [...] as a field reporter, you’ve got to be there,” notes Aleksei Bobrovnikov. “For that, they’ve made my life, my job, my work, my career [of a reporter in the field] impossible technically. [...] When you’re in exile, you basically are out of the game.” Yet, he also adds that he managed to “preserve his identity” by reconsidering his approach to journalism and currently focusing on documentary non-fiction books and creating a network of civic journalists operating on the spot.

What makes professional integration an even more pressing issue is the simple need to secure financial resources for living. Some of the participants working as freelance journalists are frustrated by the pressure of the authorities in the new country to immediately find any job: “why have I come here? If I have to work at the market, I could do that at home as well.” In a similar context, another participant discusses the limited professional opportunities in the current country of exile. “You need to be able to pay for the rent of your house at the end of the month [...] What to do now?” The language barrier makes such decisions even more complicated, and the participant is partly forced to reorient in the career. Yet, as he said, he has “managed to keep [his] voice” by both continuing his journalistic activities but also through political activism. “You leaving your country is political [...] you are also becoming a political activist.” Therefore, he is, for example, trying to help his friends who are imprisoned

by approaching different institutions and organisations. The journalism-activism nexus described was already explored by Ristow's CIMA report in 2011. In the survey that he conducted, over 60 % of the participants said that they consider themselves both activists and journalists. However, a quarter stated that they see themselves as traditional journalists. It seems that certain controversy over the use of those terms for media in exile lasts until today. In this regard, Safa Al Ahmad reflects on her experience as an exile:

> "You are put in a position of [...] okay, so you are a journalist but suddenly people are calling you a dissident, opposition, an activist [...] and those are all really loaded terms on their own and as a person who is not white, there is another burden for us to prove that we are neutral, objective, that we are not politicising."

She believes that journalists should have the right to stay within the journalism community and not be labelled by terms such as activist or dissidents if they do not want to.

Networking possibilities

This ability to stay in the media community even after leaving the home country is hindered by the lack of networking opportunities among media outlets and journalists, particularly those in exile. It is not the case, however, that such networks are entirely absent. Some participants maintain informal contact with other exiled journalists across different countries. Such informal networks seem to serve as a motivation and foster mutual support but also encourage cooperation. For example, Wilf Mbanga explains how he used those networks to offer training to other, less experienced exiled journalists. Although the networks can form organically, many participants stress that various NGOs can significantly support the whole process. For example, Muhamadjon Kabirov notes that conferences organised by NGOs enabled him to socialise with other journalists and share similar experiences. Galima Bukharbaeva further states that after the exile media forums, around 2011, there was an attempt among exiled journalists to improve communication, and notes that it is always supportive to see that others are in the same situation as you, that "you are not alone". Ultimately, however, a coordinated network between exiled journalists failed and donors lost interest in this. The journalist explains: "I felt like this cooperation ends very soon because we are all too busy with our stuff. Journalism is constant."

Toufic El Masri from Körber-Stiftung more broadly highlights that there is no genuinely coordinated network in place yet. He suggests that the media development sector could work on the objective of creating such a network for independent media in exile. An

example could be a digital platform that could connect journalists around the world. Such a project could reduce what several participants describe as a competition and lack of trust between exile media. Worrall (2019) notes that in turn, such mistrust can impede the development of one's professional networking.

Safa Al Ahmad stresses the purpose of such networking, which should not reduce itself to "putting us in one room to talk about exiled journalism." Instead, she would appreciate a platform that would enable her to see the work of other exiled journalists, discuss it and potentially support it because "right now, exiled journalism is invisible." Such a platform should be addressing the distribution process of the journalists' work. Al Ahmad notes that independent media in exile and especially freelancers do not have access to the distribution "machine", which is inherent to the mainstream media. The journalists then have to rely on themselves, for example by constantly promoting their work on social media and thus exposing themselves to harassment, trolling and other forms of digital insecurity. Therefore, the journalist would welcome NGOs to amplify exiled journalism reporting, as it would "take all the pressure from us" and provide more credibility.

Besides the possibility to create a close-knit community among exile media, some participants regret the lack of options to be integrated into the mainstream media scene of the country of exile. One prevalent issue that several interviewees mention in that regard is language. Amloud Alamir shares that for her, the most prevalent challenge of exiled journalists is the language barrier. She is in exile in Germany and explains that she does not feel comfortable in the language, although she uses it regularly in her work. This confirms observations of El Masri: the lack of inclusion in the mainstream media cannot be considered separately from the language barrier. Schönert (2019) comes to a similar conclusion in the case of exiled journalists in Germany.

Alternative Models

Two participants have adopted original models that serve as possible solutions to some of these problems. As previously explained, *Amal, Berlin!* the media outlet that Alamir works for, writes in Arabic and Farsi/Dari but reports on German news. The objective is to inform refugees in Germany about what is happening in the country of exile. Alamir shares that it is crucial for her to inform this community on how they can be active citizens of the country they live in, for instance by voting in elections. At the same time, it also enabled her to pursue her journalistic career.

Another initiative is the media outlet *Guiti News*, based in Paris. Nina Gheddar is the editor-in-chief of this outlet, which aims to provide new insights into how migration, (considered a cross-disciplinary subject that allows other crucial topics to be approached) is told. Their first objective is to "humanise the trajectories of individuals." Both the journalists in exile and French journalists are part of *Guiti News*, which aims to provide nuanced, accurate information on migration to a primarily French audience. Pairs of journalists - one in exile and one French - are constituted to report on news information. Gheddar further explains that *Guiti News* wishes "to participate in the socio-professional integration of journalists when they arrive in France." and notes that personal and professional networks are crucial for a journalist to be integrated into the mainstream media landscape. She illustrates this by stating that one of the journalists of *Guiti News* is currently finishing a journalistic curriculum in Paris, while he has been a journalist for six years in Syria. *Guiti News* recognises the broader personal and professional challenges that exiled journalists face and offers some solutions. The team thus benefits from monthly trainings, for instance on cyber-security. The media outlet has also adopted a comprehensive policy to prevent several risks that the media outlet could be confronted with. Journalists in exile may for instance experience psychological distress when they have to re-tell their exile. To counter the psychological risk, the media outlet has constituted a team of two mediators (one journalist in exile and one French journalist) to ensure that everyone feels safe in the media outlet.

IV. COMING BACK?

The journalists in exile who were interviewed were forced to leave their country because they were unable to report independently and safely in their home countries. The professional and personal challenges they face even after leaving their countries are enormous, and most of them aspire to return. Nevertheless, the situation in their home countries does not allow them to do so without putting their safety at severe risk. Aleksei Bobrovnikov dreamt to "come back on white horse" and continue reporting as he used to. Yet, he acknowledges that the current security situation does not provide this possibility. Similarly, Kamal Chomani would also like to return if he did not face persecution from the government, as he feels that "he could contribute more to the society" at home. Another interviewee notes that although he is officially allowed to return to his country due to a change in the political landscape, he remains hesitant, mainly due to the recent arrests of other journalists there. Moreover, as

another interviewee explains, even if the regime in the home country changed, it would take a few more years to be sure that the situation is safe enough to return.

Yet, as Foster (2019) notes, the timing of the potential return is crucial. If the situation in home countries improves and the exile medium hesitate for too long to return, they may risk losing their competitiveness and place in the new expanding media market. Moreover, after the return, new challenges may emerge, ranging from legal- to business-related issues. Eric Johnson points to the fact that the improvement of the situation that enables a journalist or media outlet to return also correlates with decreasing demand for information from the audience's side. This can not only be disappointing for the journalists but also challenging in terms of funding. Furthermore, the longer the journalists are in exile, the more difficult it can be to return for personal reasons. One of the journalists' children are going to school, have many friends and activities in the country of exile, and even speak its language. Therefore, a potential return to a country torn by war does not seem to be an option that the children do not know anymore does not seem to be an option. Nevertheless, there are exceptions and cases of exiled media that returned to their home countries. Foster (2019) discusses the case of Myanmar where some of the restriction of freedom of press were lifted after 2011. Yet, now, ten years later, press freedom in Myanmar witnesses a setback again (RSF, 2021). The case of Myanmar illustrates the complexities of potential return to the home countries.

V. FUTURE PROSPECTS

Although the prospect of return is rather pessimistic in a foreseeable time, the participants share with us a wide range of other plans for the future. Muhamadjon Kadirov plans to launch a satellite TV channel for *Azda.tv* to fight the government's Internet censorship attempts and reach a larger audience in Tajikistan, where access to an Internet connection is low. Furthermore, he wishes to expand on his Russian (and in the long-term also English) content. He shares his motivation:

> "The situation is not getting better. We have to work hard to change the situation. [...] We have to teach our people what democracy is, we have to teach them what it is to be living freely, what benefits you get in living in democratic societies. That's why I have chosen to work in the media."

Kabirov hopes that providing the people with independent information will improve the situation in Tajikistan and enable the start of gradual changes.

Safa Al Ahmad is currently working on a documentary film about the history of resistance in Saudi Arabia and plans to go back to Yemen, where she was reporting before she was forced to leave Saudi Arabia. She is also developing an English version of an investigative podcast that has been published in Arabic recently. Another participant aims to focus on widening the audience reach of the media outlet on social media. Their aim is also to target people interested more in apolitical content. The bigger the audience is, the more challenging it is for the government to target the outlet. The journalist also hopes that it will encourage other media to follow their path of independent reporting.

The journalists also share their ideas to tackle some of the described issues faced by exiled media. Aleksei Bobrovnikov starts to think about creating a networking concept between different media that would enable them to collaborate, for example in terms of fact-checking. Humayra Bakhtiyar, in a more long-term outlook, is thinking of creating her own NGO that would help media, including the exile ones, with the wide range of issues that she has had to tackle herself. It would enable her to formalise the support that she already provides to some of her colleagues and also address the lack of assistance that she experienced. Despite all the difficulties, the participants do want to continue their independent reporting, even if this is the reason why most of them remain unable to return to their countries; they wish to keep their voices and be heard. As Al Ahmad shares:

> “You have to continue doing the work, because it is your life, because you have to find something so that you are not starving. And I think that many media outlets benefit from it. Because it is appealing that I am doing it for something beyond the job, that I have a reason to do the work. [...] So, I continue doing it. Yet, I self-harm because I do a lot. [...] I wouldn’t do anything else, though.”

Amloud Alamir also stresses that despite the issues she is facing, she wants to continue working as a journalist, which has always been her dream. Her final note reflects what other participants also stress while sharing their experience: exiled media need more space. The visibility of the journalists' professional work and personal stories among the general public is expected to yield more resources and provide the necessary support and motivation to continue reporting. Those are all crucial to further the main purpose of independent media: provide free information to people.

VI. CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

This report aimed at outlining the findings of a study guided by the research question: *what are the main challenges faced by independent media in exile in the world and how can they be addressed?* To answer this question, we firstly conducted an extensive literature review. We then scheduled semi-structured interviews and surveys with journalists in exile, managers of exile media outlets, and with specialists in the media development sector. The adopted definition of independent media in exile entails those media that cannot operate independently and safely in their home countries. For that reason, they have to reside and continue their journalistic work in a different country. 'Media' in this case entails both media outlets in exile and journalists in exile, who sometimes work for these outlets or are freelancers.

The main findings of the research are summarised in the following lines. Firstly, the extent of physical and digital insecurity is alarming. While exile reduces the threat of physical insecurity for some of them, all journalists share that they are still confronted with different forms of digital insecurity. These range from hacking attempts to online harassment, and can have severe consequences on their ability to continue publishing news. Suggested solutions include offering trainings on cyber-security and a more proactive approach to preventing digital threats. Secondly, inconsistent funding of independent media in exile hinders their further development and is subject to constant concerns. Donor funding remains crucial, and although alternative income streams exist, their impact is limited. Thirdly, operating as media in exile brings specific challenges concerning the reach of the audience and gaining reliable sources of information. While digitalisation facilitates exchanges with the audience and sources, it also enables the traceability of communications. The development of appropriate technical solutions may need help to address them. Lastly, there are significant personal and professional challenges associated with being a journalist in exile. They range from the fear for the relatives in the home country, personal and professional isolation, to the impacts of past and present traumatic experiences on the journalists' mental health. Providing more space to exiled journalists in 'mainstream media' and developing networks among media outlets in exile seem to be promising solutions, and several outlets prove that alternative models are possible.

It is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this research. Firstly, the short period of research hindered the gathering of more data by conducting more interviews. The limited sample size of participants thus renders difficult the generalisability of the results. Generalisability is further impeded by the lack of diversity among participants, in regard to

several dimensions. It is reflected in the moderate geographic diversity, and in the relatively homogenous journalistic activities represented; most interviewees are freelance journalists. At the same time, it should be affirmed that this report aims to outline nuanced findings and highlight that the challenges faced are specific to every journalist interviewed. Further research could reach a broader and more diverse set of participants to yield conclusions that are more representative of the challenges faced by the exile media community. The second limitation resides in the lack of in-depth analysis of each challenge, and consequently the validity of the proposed solutions. Indeed, we believe that further research could delineate a comprehensive analysis of one of the issues mentioned by exploring new dimensions of each of the challenges mentioned. Such an investigation should also examine the validity of the proposed solutions. We are indeed convinced that including the perspective from donors, non-governmental organisations and individuals working for social media platforms is essential to develop promising solutions that address the challenges that independent media in exile face today.

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