



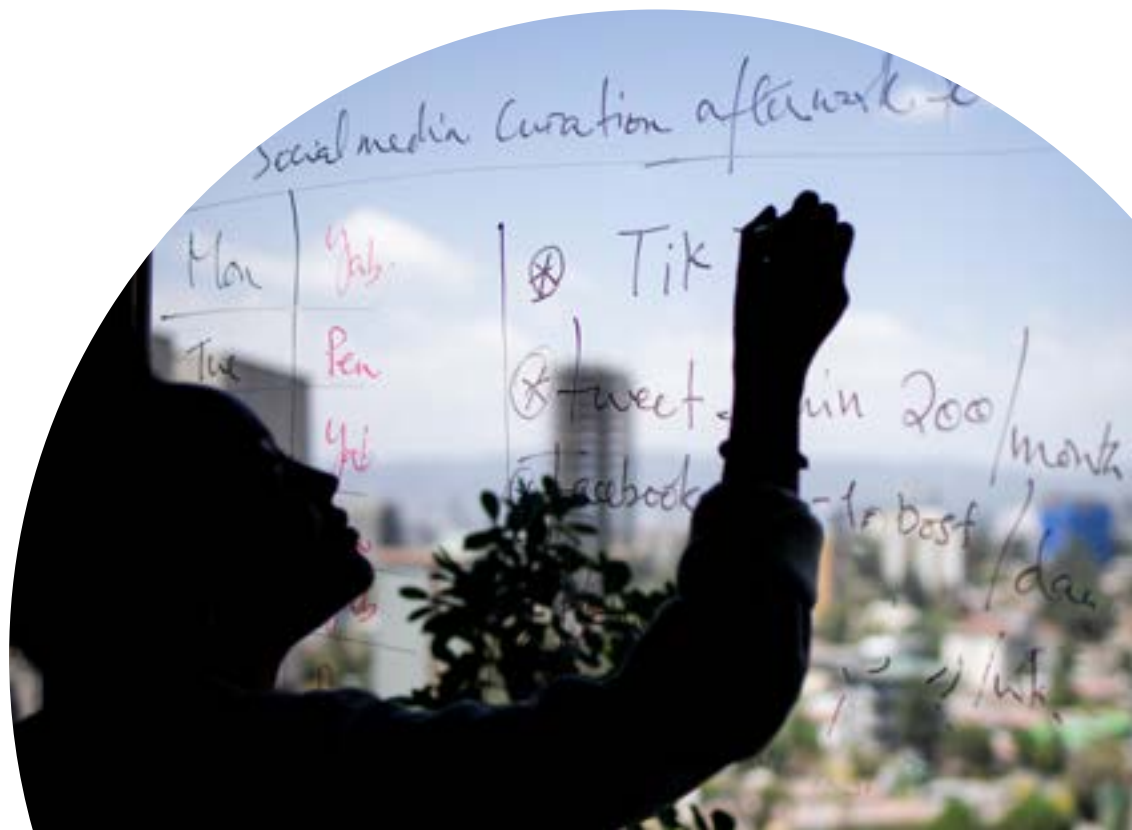
PRIMED

PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT

GLOBAL

Media Viability

LEARNING BRIEF



APRIL 2022



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Definition	2
Measuring Media Viability	2
Strategies for improving Media Viability	3
Evidence of Impact	5
Lessons Learnt	5
Glossary	7
Evidence and further reading	8
Annex A	9
Annex B	12



Introduction

This learning brief aims to summarise the main strategies and approaches embraced by media development actors seeking to tackle the challenges associated with media viability. It was written in 2020 during PRIMED’s co-creation phase to offer a point of departure for the country-specific strategies that are envisaged under the PRIMED programme. It was edited by independent media consultant Michael Randall in 2022.

Drawing on the PRIMED consortium partners’ collective experience of enhancing the viability and sustainability of public interest media in fragile contexts, the paper notes that work in this field remains diverse and fragmented. There is, therefore, a pressing need to reach consensus on the key indicators of success and how these indicators can be measured across the PRIMED programme.

PRIMED is looking to test and develop the sector’s understanding of these strategies and approaches through practice, the programme’s monitoring and evaluation and answering the learning questions.

About PRIMED

Protecting Independent Media for Effective development (PRIMED) is a three-year programme to support the provision of public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. PRIMED seeks to build the resilience of public interest media to political and economic pressures that are undermining viability, and to develop information ecosystems that enable a better flow of trusted public interest media content. With a strong focus on research and learning, PRIMED is also looking to shape media development policy and practice globally. PRIMED is implemented by a consortium of media support organisations with expertise in different aspects of media and development.



Definition

At the time of writing this brief, there was no agreed definition for “media viability”. While all current approaches address the financial aspects of media operations, most practitioners believe that viability is also linked to the manifold conditions needed to ensure professional standards, editorial independence and pluralism.

The Deutsche Welle Akademie (DWA), a leading source of research and knowledge in this area, argues that interventions aimed at supporting viability need to look beyond individual media outlets to assess the ecosystem in which they operate. For Free Press Unlimited (FPU), this ecosystem includes factors that media outlets can, to some extent, influence (such as human resources and the organisational culture) as well as factors that they cannot influence (such as the legal framework, economic conditions and the advertising market).

The Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) characterises viable media as “resilient, resourceful businesses that are strong enough to maintain their editorial independence and fulfil their critical role of providing society with timely and reliable information”. As noted by BBC Media Action, such organisations should aim to achieve financial sustainability without jeopardising their editorial integrity or their ability to produce high-quality content that reflects audience needs and priorities.

PRIMED’s definition of media viability is linked to the pre-existing economic and political conditions in the three target countries (Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone) which have worsened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, political instability and pressures on media in the PRIMED countries. PRIMED, therefore, seeks to improve the ability of potentially viable public interest media outlets to become more resilient to uncertainty while continuing to serve the public interest.

This approach may not lead to a measurable increase in revenue for media outlets during the project lifecycle but it will equip media partners with the skills and insight to

understand, anticipate and withstand shocks and stresses in the operating environment. It will help them to respond positively to these challenges through adaptability, preparedness and innovation with a view to achieving viability in the longer term. PRIMED has developed a resilience framework (see Annex A) as a guiding tool for those designing and managing media development projects. It is piloting the framework in PRIMED by working closely with a select number of partner organisations to help identify the areas identified by the tool where they face the greatest vulnerabilities, and agree on the support PRIMED can offer to address them.

Measuring media viability

As with the definitions above, there was no single approach to measuring media viability. DWA’s Media Viability Indicators are designed to assess viability on three levels, considering the overall economic environment (macro); the structure of the media market and potential sources of revenue (meso); and the resources and structures of media organisations operating in that market (micro). Conversely, MDIF seeks to promote the long-term financial well-being of individual media outlets. Its metrics are composed of seven company-specific indicators that are built using data from client business records.

PRIMED will seek to measure viability at the ecosystem level as well as at the institutional level. It will examine the extent to which media partners become more resilient to environmental shocks and stresses by improving their management systems and adopting new business practices. The programme will analyse their organisational performance against a resilience index which includes their ability to deliver inclusive and relevant public interest content.



Strategies for improving media viability in fragile contexts

There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for enhancing media viability and any workable strategy needs to be tailored to the organisational needs of the partner outlet. Arguably, interventions that work on only one level have less chance of delivering long-term impact that those which endeavour to strengthen organisations across multiple areas of activity as well as attempt to remove or overcome obstacles which exist in the operating environment. A fully holistic approach to improving media viability might include all or some of the following components:

Systemic reform

In most fragile or conflict-affected states, the growth of the media sector is stymied by restrictive policies and laws that act to inhibit freedom of expression and access to information in general, and public interest journalism in particular. Addressing these obstacles may include enhancing legal frameworks and regulatory structures as well as facilitating the creation or functioning of appropriate management and supervisory bodies.

Reform programmes for public service broadcasters will include looking at funding models that aim to ensure that these institutions are able to remain relevant and connected to their audiences while, at the same time, moving them from a state broadcasting system that is directed and controlled by government to a system that is publicly funded.

“ There are no one-size-fits-all solutions for enhancing media viability and any workable strategy needs to be tailored to the organisational needs of the partner outlet. ”

Organisational development

Media development organisations offer partners training, consultancy and advice on issues ranging from the granular to the strategic, from optimising advertising networks to developing new products that have strong revenue-generating potential. Such strategies need to be fully adapted to the contours of the operating environment, for example identifying cost-effective audience and market research methods that are suited to fragile contexts.

Substantial progress can be made by promoting greater innovation in business management. This includes developing strong brands with an in-depth understanding of their audiences and media market environment and supporting senior managers who have the skills necessary to drive innovation; facilitate business development; and reduce operating costs, where possible.

Mentoring and other forms of capacity-building at the senior level can be effectively supported by small, targeted grants aimed at implementing new strategies – for example, to conduct market research, purchase new equipment or hire experienced sales staff. Externally funded interventions can also work to forge alliances, coalitions and networks between media actors both nationally and regionally.

Connecting with audiences

Building connections between media and their audiences is key to achieving long-term viability and ensuring that content offers or schedules respond to diverse needs. This often includes addressing community relationships as well as issues of language and cultural relevance. Leading media development actors work to enhance their partners' understanding of audience interests and priorities by helping to

introduce robust feedback and engagement mechanisms.

At the same time, there is a widespread need to tackle endemic barriers in the workplace that prevent women and marginalised groups from participating fully in the development and production



of public interest content. Efforts to improve the diversity of editorial teams and promote inclusive journalism can have a direct impact on public trust and market profile. However, evidence of the links between improved gender representation in the workplace and improved media viability is poorly explored and is therefore subject for further interrogation within PRIMED in the expectation that the evidence base can be improved.

PRIMED ran a workshop in February 2022 on the importance of media understanding their audience and using that insight to build relationships and revenues. In Annex B, we have included a Q&A follow-up to the session with MDIFs media advisor Patricia Torres-Burd where she provides further thoughts on how media can better connect with their audience.

Diversifying income streams

In recognition of the limitations of most advertising markets in fragile contexts, it is widely recognised that media outlets need to diversify their income streams and introduce new business models in order to survive. Such initiatives can be facilitated by offering coaching on industry trends; providing support for specific product launches; building fundraising, reader revenue and audience engagement capacity; and facilitating an exchange of knowledge and experience between peers.

Clearly, different skills are required for different types of organisation and for their diverse markets. In some contexts, the priority may be for practical support in the mechanics of online advertising; in others, competing for traditional radio and TV commercials may still be the primary concern. Furthermore, consultancy may be needed to help partners establish clear lines between editorial and advertising content or develop new formats or revenue verticals such as partnership initiatives, native or branded advertising.

Similarly, strategies aimed at persuading audiences to pay for news are highly dependent on market and cultural forces. Media development projects can give beneficiaries the opportunity to

road-test multiple options such as introducing membership schemes disciplines and subscription models, erecting paywalls, targeting diaspora audiences and launching crowdfunding initiatives.

Media outlets have also explored ways of subsidising their journalism by selling a range of services such as consulting, training, editing, translating, event-hosting, filming and post-production. There may be opportunities for sharing costly resources such as office space, web hosting, printing presses, and audience research.

Public and donor funding

In countries where advertising markets are poorly developed or unable to sustain a pluralistic media sector, and where state support is limited or undesirable, independent media depend on donors for survival. Donor funding is particularly critical for outlets seeking to provide reliable news and information to remote or vulnerable communities which are unable to pay for high-quality content. With donors increasingly willing to provide grants directly to media outlets, there is a perceived value in helping local partners to identify and access funding opportunities as well as to manage grants.

In other countries, where markets are poorly developed but there is political will to support independent media, the potential for introducing public subsidies can be explored. These might include tax breaks, fiscal advantages associated with charitable status and postal distribution subsidies. As part of the PRIMED initiative, BBC Media Action has published a [working paper](#) that outlines approaches, models and incentives for governments to introduce public subsidies. There have also been a number of notable initiatives set to mobilise public and donor funds to media. For example the International Fund for Public Interest Media ([IFPIM](#))

“ In recognition of the limitations of most advertising markets in fragile contexts, it is widely recognised that media outlets need to diversify their income streams and introduce new business models in order to survive. ”



Evidence of impact

Numerous factors play a part in determining the success of initiatives aimed at enhancing media viability. Using the DWA framework, these factors could be categorised as follows:

- **Macro:** national/regional economy, political stability.
- **Meso:** advertising market, government interference in the market, media capture, competition from global tech companies, safety of journalists.
- **Micro:** commitment/mindset of owner and key personnel, management and technical capacity, content strategies.

Furthermore, when considering whether or not a media outlet has achieved the goal of producing content that serves the public interest, impact assessments should consider the quality of the content; the level of audience engagement; the efficiency of the outlet's editorial operation; and its ability to cover production and distribution costs in the medium to long term.

Despite the many challenges, PRIMED partners have reported significant evidence of impact in the framework of sustained interventions. FPU concludes that, as a result of recent programmes aimed at improving business models, media partners have become less dependent on its funding and, in 2019, most beneficiary outlets reduced this dependency to 10-50% of their budget. Core funding provided by FPU has allowed partners to focus on producing quality content and to experiment with new approaches.

MDIF's Impact Dashboard provides an analysis of the impact of its work by analysing client business data over time. In 2019, it found that, after five years of working with MDIF, clients had increased their revenues by an average of 218.3% (a median of 80.1%). Furthermore, beneficiaries had seen their revenues grow by a median rate of 16% per year over the same period.

IMS has supported the development of an informal network of like-minded media organisations in the Middle East. Members of the February Meet-Up Group assist one another with content production and business development, which they say has contributed to their survival (according to a

2018 evaluation). Furthermore, IMS has made demonstrable progress in improving diversity in the workplace. In Somalia, for example, it helped female media practitioners to negotiate better working conditions, as a result of which beneficiaries reported improved chances of promotion and greater willingness to remain in the profession.



 Newspapers on the street in Bangladesh, (credit: Paul Enkelaar/FPU)

Lessons learned

As stated in an article written by MDIF and published by DWA, “There is no silver bullet to overcome the economic challenges of running a media organisation and successful news companies do plenty of things differently, depending on their size, audience niche, resources available, distribution and many other factors”. Consequently, media development organisations are learning constantly from their experience of enhancing viability and developing new business models. A few key learning points are shared below.

Implement tailored interventions

Interventions must be individually tailored to an organisation's needs and must enjoy the full buy-in of the owner and of key personnel. Staff should share a commitment to embracing change and helping the organisation generate more of its own revenues. Collaboration with international media development partners works best when common interests are clearly defined and common goals are agreed with all stakeholders.



🗣️ Collaboration with international media development partners works best when common interests are clearly defined and common goals are agreed with all stakeholders. 🗣️

Give media room to experiment

Media need to have the time and space to experiment with and test new approaches. This requires financial resources, inspiration and the right mindset. Media development organisations have an important role to play in this process by providing core funding; delivering training or coaching; and ensuring that the impact of new business models is properly monitored and assessed. They can also act as a knowledge broker, exchanging experiences between media outlets in fragile contexts.

Audience listening has never been more important

Consumption habits are in a state of rapid evolution and, therefore, retaining existing audiences while attracting new ones requires constant planning and adjustments. Media should check that they are continuing to meet audience needs and should be prepared to make changes to products and adjust newsroom workflows if research findings call for a course-correction. Linking audience listening to a defined value proposition will create additional opportunities for audience engagement, developing new products and generating revenue.

Collaboration can improve reach, impact and efficiency

Alliances and partnerships can serve to extend audience reach beyond traditional coverage. They also provide added value in terms of introducing new areas of expertise, talent and specialisation. Furthermore, collaboration can achieve cost efficiencies by allowing for resource-pooling and cost-sharing or, as demonstrated by the February Meet Up Group in the MENA region, open up new commercial opportunities.

Reach and viability do not necessarily go hand in hand

While media need to engage with and grow their audiences, there are no guarantees that audience size and credibility ultimately translate into financial security. BBC MA's

experience with Al Mirbad, the most popular source of news in southern Iraq, is a case in point. Despite best efforts over the past 15 years to reduce dependence on donor funding, Al Mirbad is able to cover just 20% of its core costs from advertising. This is largely because the advertising rates offered by YouTube and other platforms in poorer economies are much lower and these operators can easily undercut mainstream media.

Support of content production should be combined with business support

The experience of multiple media development organisations suggests that support with introducing new business models should be an integral part of all development programmes, particularly those aimed at creating new content or formats. The business case for launching new products needs to be fully interrogated (assessed in terms of mission impact, reach, costs and return) before investing in these initiatives.



📍 Journalists in Sierra Leone covering the elections (credit: BBC MA)



Glossary

Media viability/sustainability: Media viability and sustainability are often used interchangeably, although many interpret ‘viability’ as including an element of public interest. The terms can be used to refer to an individual news organisation’s ability to generate revenue to cover costs or the wider environment in which media operate (economics, politics, technology etc).


Media resilience: is the ability of communities of media producers, comprised of organisations, networks of individuals, collectives and other organisational forms, to collectively produce information and journalism that helps people to participate in civic and political life, regardless of any environmental shocks and stresses, such as sustained or opportunistic attempts of coercion or the success or failure of any one media outlet.

Institutional resilience: the ability of a media institution to understand, anticipate and withstand shocks, long term stresses, and sudden changes to environment and respond positively through adaptability, preparedness and innovation to ensure the continuity of its critical function of generating content in the public interest. Resilience is necessary in order to become viable.

Public interest media/journalism: Public interest media is generally used to refer to a journalist or organisation pursuing information that the public has a right to know. It includes watchdog and investigative reporting, as well as other factual news/information and providing a platform for debate. Whether it is produced in an ethical manner is more important than the business model of its producer.

Independent media: Independent media may refer to ownership, content or both. In practice, independent media are generally seen as media that are free from the influence of government, political parties, religious and corporate interests, although a growing number of practitioners no longer use the term, preferring ‘public interest media’ instead.



 Staff from an independent media operation test new revenue streams using an Action Research cycle. (Photo Clare Cook, IMS).



Evidence and further reading

BBC Media Action, 2020, Feasibility Study Enabling Media Markets to Work for Democracy: An International Fund for Public Interest, <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/pdf/policybriefing/feasibility-study-ifpim-april2020-executive-summary.pdf>

Berglez, Olausson and Ots, 2017, What is Sustainable Journalism? Integrating the Environmental, Social, and Economic Challenges of Journalism. <https://www.peterlang.com/search?q1=What+is+sustainable+journalism&searchBtn>

Bryant, H. (2018) Before communities can invest in news, newsrooms must invest in communities <https://membershippuzzle.org/articles-overview/community-investment-1>

Cairncross, Dame Frances, 2019, The Cairncross Review: A Sustainable Future for Journalism https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/779882/021919_DCMS_Cairncross_Review_.pdf

Cook, C 2016, Fragile finance: The revenue models of oppositional news outlets in repressive regimes <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1748048516640212?journalCode=gazb&>

Deane, J et al. 2020. Achieving Viability for Public Service Media in Challenging Settings: A Holistic Approach. London: University of Westminster Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/book41>

CIMA, 2011, Matching the Market and the Model: The Business of Independent News Media <https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Matching-the-Market-and-the-Model-The-Business-of-Independent-News-Media-08-22-11.pdf>

DW Akademie, 2018 N. Jurrat, J. Lublinski, A. Mong, , Raking Muck and Raising Funds – Capacity Development Strategies for the Future of Investigative Journalism in the Global South <https://ijec.org/2018/01/29/research-raking-muck-and-raising-funds-capacity-development-strategies-for-the-future-of-investigative-journalism-in-the-global-south/>

DW Akademie, 2022, A Hollified, P Aldenrath, E Naveda , DW Akademie, 2022, “Weathering crisis. Ensuring Media Viability, continuity and resilience”. <https://static.dw.com/downloads/61319698/dw-akademie-weathering-crisis-discussion-paper-2022.pdf>

MDIF, 2019, Media Viability: 6 strategies for success <https://www.dw.com/en/media-viability-6-strategies-for-success/a-48851981>

MDIF, 2022, Gender and media viability: making a business case for diversity <https://www.mdif.org/gender-and-media-viability/>

Schiffrin, 2019, Fighting for Survival:Media Startups in the Global South <https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/fighting-for-survival/>

Shiffrin A and E Hume, 2019, Creating a Global Fund for Investigative Journalism <https://gfmf.info/gfmf-content/uploads/2019/08/Creating-a-Global-Fund-for-Investigative-Journalism.pdf>

Schiffrin, A, Clifford,H & Dame Adjin-Tettey, T, 2022, Saving Journalism 2: Global Strategies and a Look at Investigative Journalism, konrad adenauer stiftung

SembraMedia, 2017, Infection Point: a study of latin american digital media entrepreneurs <http://data.sembra-media.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Infection-Point-SembraMedia-eng-7-20.pdf>

Robert G. Picard, Valerie Belair-Gagnon and Sofia Ranchordás, 2017, The impact of charity and tax law/regulation on not-for-profit news organizations, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2017-11/The%20impact%20of%20charity%20and%20tax%20law%20regulation%20on%20not%20for%20profit%20news%20organisations.pdf>.

WAN-IFRA, 2011, Financially Viable Media in Emerging and Developing Markets https://www.wan-ifra.org/sites/default/files/field_article_file/Financial_Viability_Report_WAN-IFRA.pdf

WAN-IFRA, 2019, Unlocking Journalism Resilience: Adapting a Digital Business Model to Promote Press Freedom https://blog.wan-ifra.org/sites/default/files/field_blog_entry_file/WAN-IFRA_Unlocking_Journalism_Resilience_N.pdf

Westergaard, P. & Jørgensen, S. 2018, . 54 newsrooms, 9 countries, and 9 core ideas: Here's what two researchers found in a yearlong quest for journalism innovation. Retrieved from <https://www.niemanlab.org/2018/07/54-newsrooms-9-countries-and-9-core-ideas-heres-what-two-researchers-found-in-a-yearlong-quest-for-journalism-innovation/>

Živković M, 2016, Who will pay for journalism? Alternative Models for Independent Media <http://www.mirovni-institut.si/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Alternative-Models-for-Media-Funding-Who-Will-Pay-for-Journalism.pdf>



ANNEX A

PRIMED Media resilience framework

This document describes the approach used by PRIMED to report on impact against Indicator 2: Extent to which media partners supported by PRIMED become *more resilient* to environmental shocks and stresses

The logframe envisaged the development of an Index to measure “organisational resilience, including financial stability and reserves, innovation, culture, ability to change, assessment of risks, strength of relationships and networks, management acumen, the ability to withstand political pressure, harassment, threat of legal action or arrests”, whilst recognising that the index needs to remain sensitive to context, as no two organisations and no two countries are the same.

The examples of media resilience areas referred to in the logframe have been simplified and are now presented under four key areas and sub areas as follows:

Area and sub-area	Vulnerabilities (examples)
1. Institution building	
1.1 Legal registrations and licenses	<p>Inadequate/incomplete/unaffordable registration/licences make the organisation more susceptible to threat of closure, or ineligible for some income streams or activities;</p> <p>In some contexts registrations are unreasonably onerous as a tactic of curtailing media freedoms.</p> <p>Small and ill-prepared organisations struggle to prepare the necessary paperwork or cannot afford the fees and remain therefore highly exposed and open to harassment.</p>
1.2 Governance	<p>The governance of the organisation is unclear, no clear mechanism to make strategic decisions and hold daily management to account. It is therefore vulnerable to poor decisions or lack of decisioning mechanisms. The lack of clearly articulated and lawful governance structure make it vulnerable to failing to comply with local laws and procedures; lack of transparent governance structure or the concentration of decisioning in the hands of a single individuals, without checks and balances means that bowing to pressures is more likely</p>
1.3 Mission/ vision, Purpose, strategy, editorial proposition	<p>The organisation does not have a clear strategy and remit, making it vulnerable to drifting from its purpose, losing sight of its core product, getting diverted in pursuit of short-term funding (and possibly losing the longer term business rationale); it might also be unable to change where required, because it is not clear about its purpose in the first place</p>



1.4 Consistency of professional output and oversight;	On air content is inconsistent in its professional standards, making the organisation unable to defend its editorial stance and therefore susceptible to challenges, political pressure and threats of legal action
1.5 Leadership	The head of the organisation is an absentee leader, powers are not properly delegated to enable effective decisions making especially at times of crisis; lack of succession planning, no specialisms (e.g., the same person makes all the decisions without any data or advice from a trained accountant, lawyer, technical/engineering expert...
1.6 Work force	The workforce is ill-equipped to deliver the services at the heart of the organisation's purpose; high turn over; lack of skills and inability to recruit skills required to allow the business to adapt, change, grow with changing needs; lack of training and induction; workforce not committed to the work or unaligned with the organisational purpose, strategy and editorial proposition; nepotism, favouritism, cloning prevent the organisation from building a constructive workforce. This becomes a particularly noticeable vulnerability when the organisation is facing specific challenges such as drop in income, increased political pressure, instability in the security situation
2. Operating model	
2.1 Business model optimisation, flexibility and adaptability	The organisation may be blind to making better use of its existing business model (for example, it is only working through ad agency even though direct ad sales may generate more lucrative income; or the business model may need to be quickly adapted to reduce production costs and backfill airtime with repeat cycles
2.2 Security and stability of sources of Income	The organisation may be too reliant on a single source of income (though this is not necessarily a vulnerability if this source is enshrined in law, for example, or comes under a long term agreement); it may be making overly optimistic (and untested) assumptions on yield rather than combining high risk with low risk income strands to achieve a balance; the organisation may not be informed of its operating budget until the very last minute each year...
2.3 Innovation, efficiency and cost-effectiveness	The organisation's processes are rigid or it lacks the ability to invest or develop new processes that might secure lower costs in future
2.4 Operating procedures and business systems	Lack of systems to track expenditure, generate income and cost forecasts, cashflow planning, deal with debtors and collect income make the organisation vulnerable to immediate financial crises.
2.5 Assets, technology and equipment	The organisation is tied to expensive technology or old technology or equipment that requires increased human resources; it has no assets and no ability invest in assets in order to reduce its cost base; The organisation has no technical backup to allow for business (transmission) continuity
3. Financial security	
3.1 Existence of multi-year income and expenditure plans	The organisation funding cycles are short, none stretch for more than a year, and the organisation is unable to develop a five year business plan, for example, or even a one year plan; the organisation has already experienced repeat cycles of stop-start
3.2 Existence of operating reserves	The organisation does not have any operating reserves to allow it to bridge periods of reduced income;
3.3 Liquidity	It has no cash reserves to allow it to spend while payments are pending (connected to reserves)
4. Environmental/external factors	
4.1 Influence of power holders	The organisation is reliant on government advertising which can be withdrawn when the minister is displeased; accreditation is dependent on individuals within the security forces;



4.2 Understanding the market, consumers and competition	The organisation has lost touch with its audience, does not have a competitive edge; does not appeal to specific
4.3 Support networks – in country and internationally (sectoral bodies, community forums, civil society organisations, educational institutions, watchdogs)	The organisation is isolated, when there is an attempt to bury a story or to silence its journalists, it is unable to reach out to others for support

As part of the investigations and formation of the engagement plans, PRIMED has worked closely with each partner organisation to identify the areas where they face the greatest vulnerabilities, and agree on the support PRIMED can offer to address them. Targets have been set for this purpose within the engagement plans and are presented using three categories of change:

- **Absorptive:** The ability of the media organisation to cope with or bounce back from known vulnerabilities (e.g. effective business-as-usual capability)
- **Adaptive:** The ability of the media organisation change and adapt
- **Transformative:** The ability of the media organisation to take more fundamental and transformative responses to longer term and more structural causes of vulnerability e.g. ability to shape the environment.



ANNEX B

Why connecting with audiences is vital for viability

Patricia Torres-Burd, Managing Director of MDIF's Media Advisory Services, ran a workshop session on the "First steps towards viability" for independent media in challenging environments as part of PRIMED, a UK-funded initiative supporting media in Ethiopia, Bangladesh and Sierra Leone. The session, which took place in February 2022, focused on the importance of media understanding their audience and using that insight to build relationships and revenues. In a Q&A follow-up to the session, Torres-Burd provides further thoughts on how independent media can better connect with their audience.

Why is understanding your audience fundamental to running a news business?

A news business provides a product with its own specific make-up of news and information. That product is then presented to the audience, who is the news brand's consumer. As in any business, not having a thorough understanding of your customer/consumer will lead to inefficiencies, missteps in audience engagement and difficulties in growth and impact. Tracking audience data will allow a newsroom to understand their consumer better and interact with them. In addition, this information can provide an excellent launchpad for growth that combines the ability to attract a new audience/consumers while ensuring retention of the loyal base.

What are the benefits of audience research? Can you give an example of it being done well?

It is vital to understand the traffic and habits of those that read/visit your content. If they are only staying for a couple of seconds, they have most likely not found anything that serves them. If they do remain longer, are they finishing certain types of pieces? Can you then guide them to other similar content within your site?

The news world, for the most part, experienced a COVID bump in traffic, and those who retained these new consumers were media organisations that were active audience listeners – they provided crucial information for their community that lasted beyond the bump and created loyalty. It is about properly informing and delivering value to the community you serve.

Many MDIF clients carefully follow their audience habits and have introduced added content (by testing specific genres) to create this "added value proposition". In several examples, beyond critical COVID information, many of these newsrooms began to offer services such as educational resources for parents, government programme links for small businesses and even reading and film recommendations. The pandemic drastically changed how people consume news and those media that adapted and adjusted their newsroom priorities have been able not only to retain their base audience but, in many cases, have also seen impressive growth.

How does a media organisation really listen to its audience?

There are many options, both free of charge and paid tools. The choice really depends on how the data will be interpreted and, most importantly, utilised. It is not enough to say we have X number of unique visitors; the news editorial leadership must set audience engagement as a priority part of their strategy. There is also the issue of capacity – who is responsible for measuring this data and providing useful metrics that the news teams can use? As we know, SEO plays a critical role in the titles of content and way beyond. I should clarify that SEO and specific metrics will always vary and that they are particular to each organisation. There are media entities with tremendous impact and reach who serve their communities extensively. There are also much smaller audiences that make up the core of media that is just as important in the region or community they cover, providing critical information that those readers (large or small) can use in their daily lives. I would add that ensuring there is a loyal base that is well served and can then grow is pivotal. Many media, unfortunately, are focused on metrics such as the top of the funnel in monthly unique visitors



and do not understand the critical importance of the loyal user. It is this much smaller but so important sector that defines the real base of your consumer/customer/audience.

Can you give some examples of how media have worked well with their community?

One of the reasons I love working at MDIF is that we support media whose mission it is to serve. They work diligently to create value and trust to inform their readers. We saw so many of them rise to the occasion during the pandemic – I will name a few here, but all of them did.

RTV21 in Kosovo, a television and digital platform media organisation, went far beyond mobilising its community during COVID and especially in the first couple of months. The leadership provided space and time (paid) for their staff to help others in a manner of their choosing. RTV21's staff not only volunteered to help but also found purpose. An especially important side effect of this was that the needs, questions and concerns of those they helped provided incredible value to the newsroom and company as they worked to inform people in Kosovo.

Other examples included:

The Daily Maverick in South Africa, which immediately pivoted their highly successful in-person events to online. They quickly realised that people were desperate for information and conversations and needed to be able to ask questions of those in power. Their first webinars or Zoom events included government and health officials talking about the pandemic measures for the country. They later began to include subjects for small businesses that were impacted. This and the other examples helped them to better serve their community by providing vital information that was changing minute by minute.

Red Acción in Argentina connected community callouts to those who needed help with those who could offer it. They matched people who could cook, deliver or help in some other way to those who were struggling. In turn, the team created a way for people to come together and positively impact their communities. They motivated and connected people as well as helped mobilise them to action.

In Ecuador GK, a digital news site, helped people to mourn those they lost. The country was amongst the hardest hit by the pandemic and relatives had trouble recovering their loved ones remains. GK provided a space for people to add images, pictures, memories and record a special tribute to them. It provided a way of respect, connection, support and remembrance of the tragedy of the pandemic and served as a form of closure when funerals and normal traditions were not possible.

How can auditing your audience strategy support viability?

Auditing your audience strategy can help viability, and how it does depends on the viability strategy of the organisation. Without an audience deep dive and audit, any organisation would be hard-pressed to effectively decide if a membership or subscription model or any other product introduction will work for them. Likewise, a media organisation cannot ask their audience to support them with payment if they don't have a very cohesive understanding of the consumer base.

A keen understanding of many of the areas mentioned earlier and much more will provide growth opportunities. For example, if readers remain on your site – and on one specific content genre – does it make sense to think about and test a newsletter in that genre? The opportunity to have them engage is right there, with a properly placed newsletter subscription call to action. This is one example – we know from industry data that newsletters, when executed properly, can provide remarkably high percentages of engagement return. If the relationship is built properly and the product is evaluated, designed and delivered with the consumer in mind, it can and will lead to substantial conversion in audience, engagement and support (membership) or subscriptions.

Other examples will include a better definition of the value proposition your organisation offers, how and when to deliver it, and in doing so identify the best ways to further engage with the audience. These will lead to better planning in content verticals, newsletters, webinars, podcasts, etc., and will provide opportunities for reaching new audiences, increasing impact and scale that translates into revenue.



What types of small collaborations can be effective with other media and non-media?

The value of collaboration depends on the type or emphasis of the news and information any media organisation produces. There may be collaborations that focus on an urgent need and impact tailored to be more in the pacing of singular efforts/initiatives, or opportunities may present themselves that are better suited to long-term cooperation.

Partnering with other media increases efficiency through shared costs, it can also provide exposure to talent as well as expertise and news leads beyond the media outlet's current reach. Some of the very well-known collaborations include the famous Panama Papers and more recent Paradise Papers, which would not have been possible without extensive cooperation. Smaller but just as important efforts may include two separate media organisations partnering to cover any range of issues by sharing efforts and knowledge. The communities they serve in their respective regions or countries will benefit from such a partnership. The formula for any collaboration will vary but should be centred on bringing expertise to inform readers and providing strength in reporting and reach, translating to impact.

There are also client-based partnerships where an entity will support certain informative efforts without any editorial input. We have seen examples where a bank has supported a series of financial education segments geared at women and young entrepreneurs. However, there needs to be great caution when working with a brand to ensure that they are not just selling a service, for example a bank could be a sponsor but not advertising their credit card or a product.



Business Opportunities

Be ready to pivot
Creativity brings challenges and results

New Audiences

Growth in traffic leads to better content offers

Data & Audience Metrics

At the same level of importance is when a media organisation has taken the time to have a thorough understanding of their community or the audience they want to serve, they will be better able to provide them with daily information, as we have seen in the pandemic and the current crisis, in times of critical needs. In addition, the ability to accurately measure the data available from the audience/ consumers will translate into better engagement AND business opportunities.

Data & Audience Metrics

Understanding consumer's habits during this crisis is critical
You will have a better understanding on how to improve your offers to them and clients

Long-term Relationships

Plan for the future
Understand prolonged economic impact
Supporting small business enterprises and larger clients now, may lead to future business

New Audiences

The same process of audience analytics will also allow for identifying a sector of the community that is not consuming your news or content. Is it possible to attract them? What do they consume? Where are they? What do they need? How can you increase your audience reach and at the same time stay true to your mission and your current loyal readers? If your site suddenly sees an increase in traffic, are you able to retain them? If not, why not?

These points are all very strategic in nature and will help create a momentum for steady growth.

Long-term Relationships

Any relationship, business, engagement, or partnership is built on trust. Understanding the above points will help leadership plan for the future, while at the same time protecting their relationships with audience, clients, grantors or investors.

In closing, a great focus is placed on the business of media and how to reach sustainability. If media is to continue its critical role in serving communities and providing access to information to empower – they must survive.

There is no one recipe that fits all. Each media, organisation, region and country are vastly different, as are the audiences they reach. Yet we can and should learn from those who are innovating and introducing immensely powerful manners to add value to the lives of those they serve.

Please explain the 4-sector chart

This chart applies to a need for media, anywhere in the world, to have a thorough understanding of the market they serve, including market statistics for audience, demographics, access to print, radio, tv and digital, and also a definition of the competition and what economic, political and cultural barriers are present. Pricing of the market does not only apply to advertising (programmatic, platform specific, banner or direct) but also staffing and capacity of delivery. The latter includes staff retention which is a problem around the world.

One of the most problematic statements is, «we have no competition». That is insanity. In today's media landscape, content is delivered in a multitude of manners, when and where people want to consume it and, in many cases, instantly. Everyone has competition!

Business Opportunities

Having a clear picture of the market you serve requires time, patience, research and asking many questions of your constituency, partners and even competitors. It is work that will result in creative manners in which to overcome obstacles and find new business opportunities.



PRIMED
PROTECTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA
FOR EFFECTIVE DEVELOPMENT



Public interest media are vital to open, just societies – they provide trusted news and information, hold the powerful to account and create a platform for debate. Yet truly public interest media are in crisis.

PRIMED (Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development) is a three-year programme to support public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone – addressing critical challenges, building resilience, and sharing research and insight about what works.

Led by BBC Media Action, PRIMED partners include Free Press Unlimited, International Media Support and Media Development Investment Fund, with additional support from Global Forum for Media Development and The Communications Initiative.

PRIMED is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.



This brief was edited by Michael Randall who has worked in the media development sector for more than 20 years, mostly for BBC Media Action where he led large-scale projects aimed at promoting public interest journalism in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Michael currently works as an independent consultant, focusing on project design and development as well as monitoring, evaluation and learning.
Design: Ian Bennett.

To learn more about PRIMED please see bbcmediaaction.org or email media.action@bbc.co.uk.

 @bbcmediaaction  @bbcmediaaction  bbcmediaaction

BBC Media Action is a registered charity in England and Wales (no 1076235) and a company limited by guarantee in England and Wales (no 3521587) at Broadcasting House, Portland Place, London W1A 1AA, United Kingdom.