

Media Viability

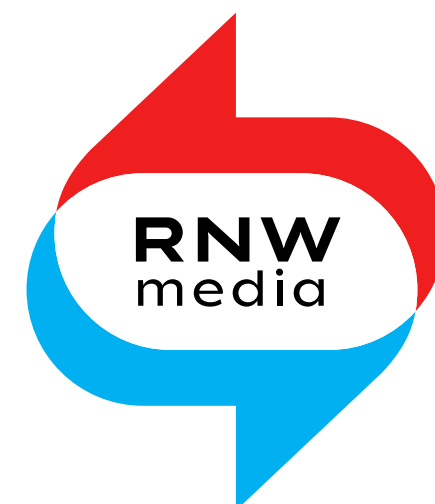
in an Era of Repression
& Resistance



RIGHT HERE
RIGHT NOW



Utrecht
University



Report Contributors: Bruce Mutsvairo and Sana Naqvi
Graphic design: Dan Yépez and Militza Martinez

Acknowledgments

This report was made possible through the contributions of our research interviewers, whose insights and fieldwork informed the findings presented here. We also acknowledge the valuable input from our partners who participated in the focus group discussions, as well as the survey participants whose perspectives strengthened the evidence base of this work. Special thanks to project intern and researcher Harry de Haan for contributing writing and research in the creation of this report, and to Rowena Ricalde, Network Lead, for coordinating the partner conversations that shaped this research.

Table of Contents



Executive summary	4
Introduction	10
Literature review	14
Methodology	18
Main findings	21
Cross-cutting insights	27
Further research	35
Conclusion	37
References	39

Executive Summary





This report employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data to explore how independent digital media practitioners are adopting artificial intelligence (AI) and navigating broader challenges associated with media viability in an evolving funding landscape. It goes without saying that public interest journalism, seen as impact and human rights driven reporting that informs, fosters, protects and promotes public debate is a vital lifeblood for democratic participation and information integrity. Yet journalists and content creators continue to face mounting pressures worldwide. Although numerous scholarly and practice-based investigations and interventions have explored these constraints and proposed potential pathways forward, the majority of such studies have largely focused on top-down frameworks rooted in the Global North with a growing scientific consensus pointing to the exclusion of non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries.

This report examines the state of media viability. RNW Media defines Media Viability as ‘the ability of public interest and independent media to sustainably operate in a way that ensures financial health, editorial independence, and capacity to facilitate mutually beneficial partnerships and movements that serve pluralistic and diverse media and promotes democracy in fragile and under-resourced contexts. RNW Media focuses on how financial models, editorial integrity, structural barriers, and technological innovation intersect in a combined bid to serve independent journalism from collapse. It draws on a survey of 28 professionally-engaged media workers from RNW Media’s Vine network, supported by eight in-depth interviews with organizations either based in, or with a traceable track record of working with organizations, in Burundi, Lebanon, Kenya, Mali, Cuba, India, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and one organization in Europe.

This report also draws on previous research by RNW Media “AI Adoption among Changemakers”, that surveyed 124 independent media practitioners. Insights emerging from this report highlight that building viability is not solely a financial or technological matter, but also an organizational and cultural one. The report focuses on the leading factors influencing the growth of media viability in restrictive settings, which range from language, algorithmic biases, AI and funder restrictions.

We begin by highlighting the report's key findings:



Financial dependence remains the core constraint

- Our survey findings show that 81% of respondents rely primarily on short-term, project-based donor grants. This funding model limits long-term planning and fosters dependency coming at a time when Western development agencies are cutting back on financial assistance. Editorial compromises and self-censorship (reported by 60% of respondents) are closely linked to this financial precarity.



Funding options are diversifying, but unevenly

- A majority of respondents to the survey concur that while grants dominate, other instruments are emerging. These include loans and long-term investments (e.g., through the Media Development Investment Fund) offer new pathways to reduce donor reliance.



Revenue from journalistic enterprise

- Membership, advertising, subscriptions remains under 10% globally but shows promise where audience trust is strong.



Service-oriented diversification

- Training, consultancy, content production helps outlets generate income, but risks being undercut by free training programs provided by international NGOs, which can distort local markets.



Structural and legal barriers entrench dependency

- In legal terms, NGO/CSO registration prevents outlets from generating commercial revenue, locking them into donor funding cycles. Grassroots actors are further excluded by bureaucratic barriers to grants. A few outlets have overcome these restrictions by adopting hybrid nonprofit/for-profit models.



Trust, language, and access are decisive factors

- Credibility emerges as a precondition for audience-based funding. Scandals and censorship pressures demonstrate how quickly trust can erode. Respondents stressed the importance of publishing in multiple indigenous languages to expand reach, and noted how platform algorithms and state-imposed censorship limit both visibility and monetization. Respondents raise significant concerns about the undercutting of editorial integrity by donor/funder priorities.

- 86% of respondents use ChatGPT



AI adoption is widespread but contested

or similar tools for translation, SEO, or content creation. Outlets such as Raseef22 (Lebanon), Love Matters Africa (Kenya), and RAHU (Uganda) highlight AI's potential to expand reach, contextualize content, and engage youth. Yet concerns persist over:

- **Copyright and loss of income**, especially for small-scale creators competing with AI-generated material.
- **Depersonalization and bias**, where AI-generated outputs risk diluting editorial voice and reinforcing biases related to gender and racial stereotypes, and lack of diversity of language, algorithmic biases target content that is not in English.
- **Unequal access**, as AI tools often reach Global South practitioners later and with fewer resources.
- **AI literacy remains low**, hindering effective and ethical use of AI tools. The utilization of AI tools among media workers is growing but remains low in comparison to rich and industrialized nations.

Cross-Cutting Insights



Financial independence is essential but fragile

➤ Without diversified funding, including grants, long-term investments, and income-generating activities, outlets remain vulnerable to political and economic pressure, as well as changing priorities of funding agencies/donors.



Legal structures shape viability

➤ Restrictive frameworks trap outlets in dependency, while hybrid models and diaspora hubs provide more enabling alternatives hence advocacy for platform accountability and broader media regulatory frameworks is essential for advancing media viability.



Editorial integrity and trust are strategic assets

➤ Credibility enables audience engagement and revenue generation, yet it is undermined by financial precarity and censorship. It also helps build trust, inclusivity and easy accessibility to the digital media ecosystem. All these are essential to media workers' ability to successfully embrace and understand media viability.



AI is a catalyst and a risk

➤ It offers efficiency and innovation but also threatens sustainability through ethical, economic, and creative challenges. Data bias, enhancement of stereotypes and exclusion of minority or non-Western languages are some of the reasons why some media workers based in the Global South are sceptical about AI.



Leadership capacity matters

➤ Entrepreneurial, business-oriented, and inclusive leadership strengthens resilience and positions outlets to adapt creatively.



Recommendations

➤For Funders:

- Flexibility in all types of funding to have autonomy over content editorial decision-making and also publishing/dissemination strategies, specifically tailored to local contexts; explore loan and investment instruments; lower barriers for grassroots outlets; invest in business and leadership capacity; support ethical AI adoption.
- Ensure more local ownership so media organisations are in control insofar as identifying and addressing capacity development needs within their local contexts is concerned.
- Due to the advent of technology the divide between the ‘haves and have nots’ are becoming larger therefore it is critical to be inclusive as much as possible.

➤For Media Support Organizations:

- Establish regional hubs and shared infrastructures in partnership with local media actors and organisations to enable and ensure localised trainings and knowledge exchange.
- Facilitate access to spaces and convenings that enable connection and dialogue with key technology actors, regulators and policymakers.
- Implement collective advocacy initiatives that advance platform accountability, freedom of press, and support for pluralistic public interest media.



Recommendations

➤ For Media Organizations:

- Our research shows that it is essential for local media players to remain steadfastly committed to journalistic principles that ensure fact-based, responsible reporting and content which enhances trust in media content and ensure revenue generation. Leadership diversity also stood out as another crucial factor.
- Diversify revenue streams through services, memberships and diaspora engagement. Audience engagement leads to trust, which is contingent on media ownership and editorial independence. Adopting AI strategically and ethically is crucial alongside building entrepreneurial leadership and capacity.
- Explore and experiment with hybrid models - combining for-profit with non-profit mechanisms and social enterprise modality.

Media viability is not simply a matter of survival but of sustaining editorial independence, trust, and innovation under pressure. Independent media in fragile contexts are experimenting with new models, from hybrid legal structures to AI-enabled engagement, yet structural barriers and funding imbalances persist. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across funders, media support organizations, and media actors themselves. Only through integrated strategies, combining financial independence, editorial integrity, structural reform, and ethical innovation, can independent media ecosystems thrive as a cornerstone of democratic resilience.

Introduction





Public interest journalism in a digital era plays a crucial role in sustaining information integrity, democratic participation, and civic engagement. Yet across the globe, these outlets face mounting pressures: financial precarity, restrictive legal environments, donor dependency, and threats to editorial independence. Shifting funding priorities, public support for independent journalism, increased political & economic pressure, and emerging technologies, are reshaping the conditions under which media actors operate. For independent and public interest media, AI presents both opportunities for innovation and efficiency and risks of ethical compromise, homogenization, and deepened inequalities in access and capacity.

Words like “ChatGPT,” “automation,” or “algorithms” are hastening to crawl into our lives. AI is the new buzz word; however Artificial Intelligence (AI) has its origins since 1956 from an interdisciplinary research proposal “to understand human thought, particularly logic as a mechanical process of symbol manipulation” (McCarthy, Shannon, Rochester 1955). This idea of attempting to reverse engineer the human brain has taken many divergences, also finding definitions of AI that are more human-centred. Other studies have credited mathematician and computer science pioneer Alan Turing with the 1950s discovery of AI. What matters today however, is the fact that AI is fast becoming a new reality.

In her course “We are All AI” developed at NYU, Prof. Julia Stoyanovich defines AI as computer systems that use algorithms to learn from data in order to make decisions on our behalf or help us make decisions. Within the journalism profession, AI has made inroads as journalists and other media workers use technology to gather and report news. While AI is reshaping the media landscape, its appropriation and impact has been varied across regions of the world.

Dartmouth College, an Ivy-league American university, has firmly remained in the history books as an epicenter for the AI revolution in 1956. Fast-forward to 2023, OpenAI introduced the tool ChatGPT. This generative AI is a technology that functions through natural language prompts creating text, images, and other formats by harvesting data it has been trained on. Since its launch, this AI chatbot system has been used by millions of users. We can say, it is accessible and user- friendly, and responds to tasks for a wide range of roles, for which it has gained its popularity. ChatGPT and other text and image generating AI tools are transforming the landscape for impact organizations and media makers active in the digital sphere. There are many aspects in which these tools are making the use of digital media more dynamic, and in which we might encounter innovative ways to enhance the impact of our interventions and ways of working.

The declining and in some cases, totally fading models of journalism including dependence on advertising has forced many media managers to rethink their strategy. AI has claimed its space as a potential journalistic tool but as we discuss later in this report, technological advancement has not always delivered.

Media viability, broadly understood as the ability of independent outlets to survive, adapt, and maintain editorial integrity over time, has become a central concern in media studies and policy debates. Existing scholarship highlights four recurring dimensions of viability: financial sustainability, audience trust, editorial independence, and innovation. However, much of this work remains concentrated in Western and Global North contexts, leaving underexplored how viability is negotiated in more restrictive or fragile environments, and how actors in the Global South are localizing strategies of resilience. Despite the expanding interest in AI among media workers, more needs to be done to understand how it could enhance media viability in the long term. Furthermore, as AI development and adoption increasingly becomes a focal point in both academic and public discussions, there is still limited research on how small-scale and independent media integrate these technologies into their daily practices and long-term strategies related to their growth, sustainability, and impact. While media viability as a concept goes beyond the adoption of AI, new technology certainly offers new opportunities for media workers to generate income through automation and other reliable content creation ventures.

To gain deeper understanding of the adoption and impact of AI technology among digital media professionals, we reached out to RNW Media's global community community, called the Vine. With more than 25 independent and public interest digital media, 80 media trainers, and 10,000 RNTC (RNW Media's Training Centre) alumni, RNW Media facilitates media coalition, partnership and movement building. This dynamic network serves as a hub for innovation, fostering ideas, connections, and inspiration. The Vine provides a fertile ground for exploring the transformative role of AI in the media landscape.

As such, this report serves as a concise overview of how independent media has adopted AI and other new technologies in their work, especially in contexts where English is not the primary language. Our focus is not solely on AI. We also make an attempt to understanding different trends associated with media viability in the contemporary world. To achieve this goal, we present results from a survey conducted in January 2024 with responses from 28 individuals from the Vine, active in the development and digital media sectors. Additionally, we also present responses from interviews with organizations either based in, or with a traceable track record of working with organizations based in Burundi, Lebanon, Kenya, Mali, Cuba, India, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and one organization in Europe.

RNW Media's insights based on the answers from independent media makers will be detailed in the next pages. First, the report will current literature on media viability and the link with AI. Secondly, it outlines some concrete examples of different financial approaches organizations are using to garner audience trust and stay viable. Finally, it will present current challenges and opportunities.

Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, we ask:

- 1. How do structural conditions, including funding dependencies, legal frameworks, and audience dynamics, shape the prospects for media viability in these contexts?**
- 2. How are independent media actors adopting AI and other digital technologies, and for what purposes?**
- 3. What challenges and opportunities do they encounter in integrating these tools into their organizational models and editorial workflows?**
- 4. What lessons can be drawn across regions that may inform funders, policymakers, and practitioners?**

By situating empirical findings from underrepresented contexts within broader debates on media viability and digital transformation, this report contributes to both scholarly and practitioner-oriented conversations. It highlights not only the diversity of experiences and strategies across regions but also the common structural obstacles that must be addressed if independent media are to thrive in the digital age, perspectives that are not fully present in current literature.

Literature Review





It is no secret that the advent of AI has unsettled many media workers and researchers. Recent research in journalism studies has ranged from showing excitement about AI's potential in professional practice (Dodds et. al 2025) to a mixture of both pessimism and optimism (Umejei et. al 2025) or from overly positive portrayal of AI (Oh, 2025) to cautious optimism (Amigo & Porlezza, 2025). While Dodds et. al 2025 provide a positive outlook on AI's integration into journalism practice warning how "this critical moment also offers a generative opportunity of its own: an off-ramp to escape the hamster wheel, break away from tired routine, re-evaluate what it means to do good work and stay informed, and, overall, to more thoughtfully apply technology where it can create value in journalistic work and resist or refuse it where it cannot." Umeijej et al (2025)'s study on journalists' appropriation of AI in news production in Ghana, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya highlight both fears and enthusiasm among African journalists. On the other hand, Amigo and Porlezza's study referenced above on AI and journalism in Switzerland posits that "the disruptive potential of AI is (still) considered limited." In light with that argument, Oh (p.1), as referenced above, calls AI "transformative tool" that enhances "efficiency, effectiveness, fostering a new organizational culture." However, media viability cannot be restricted to AI alone. To understand it fully, we need a holistic approach.

When President Donald Trump issued an executive order suspending US financial assistance for foreign institutions, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele responded by accusing journalists cut off from the foreign aid of being part of "a global money laundering operation" (López Linares, 2025). Nowhere was Trump's executive order well received than in authoritarian states, which have long considered U.S. and Western financial interventions as threats to their own political longevity. Indeed, we write this report within the context of rising authoritarianism across the world. For example, Cheeseman et al. (2023) posit that if the decline of democracy continues at the present pace, less than five percent of the world's population will live in a full democracy by 2026. Their observations are supported by Lindberg (2023), who in a recent report, concludes that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average world citizen in 2022 is back to 1986 levels, meaning "72 percent of the world's population, 5.7 billion people, live under (some sort of) authoritarian rule." As such, authoritarianism poses an existential threat to public interest journalism practice regardless of nation in which journalists work or live.

Research shows that even transnationally in democratic countries, authoritarian tendencies are already gaining ground (Adler et al. 2023). Furthermore, public interest journalism is facing mounting challenges due to this global surge in authoritarian rule (Diamond et al. 2016). This explains why authoritarian states favor financial injections into state-driven media institutions, which focus almost exclusively on pro-government reporting and feeding into state narratives, which erode trust in the digital media ecosystem as whole. Other challenges facing traditional journalism today include the proliferation of misinformation owing to tech-driven changes, the erosion of the audience's trust in journalism/news, the failure to guarantee the safety and security of journalists along with the rise of alternative voices mainly emerging from the digital creator economy.

Attempts to suppress journalistic freedom are rife in authoritarian countries as well as among exiled journalists, which often leads to self-censorship (Sheen et al. 2024). Many independent journalists covering authoritarian countries suffer in silence for fear of reprisals, undermining journalism's role in holding these governments accountable and pushing for transparency (Akser & Baybars 2023). Persistent assaults on journalists in both the real (physical) and virtual (digital) worlds continue to pose a powerful threat to a healthy and inclusive democratic discourse. Amid a ubiquitous expansion of authoritarianism globally (Glasius 2018), the future of independent journalism looks dire. These regimes jail journalists, threaten them or use legal means to silence them, strengthening their grip on power. Independent journalists constantly have to flee their home countries to escape this political repression. Once they settle in the countries that they consider to be safer state and non-state actors from their home countries regularly threaten them both physically and online in an attempt to silence them (Arafat 2021). They are kept under surveillance with their respective home governments keen on knowing their source of funding. Various techniques, including digital surveillance (Al-Rawi 2024) or online harassment (Slavtcheva-Petkova 2023), are employed. These state-sanctioned attacks are a grim reminder of the unique threats that authoritarian governments pose to independent journalists.

A wider pattern of state-led repression against independent journalists has also been recorded in several countries across the world. We need to acknowledge the rise of non-state-led repression including economic and legal threats, physical threats by individuals and groups. Some are forced to flee to other countries, where some of them continue working as reporters in a practice known as exile journalism (Arafat 2021). These intensifying attacks against independent journalists demonstrate why efforts to support and sustain journalistic independence, defined as the absence of external influence or interference in the production of news (van Drunen & Fechner 2022), is of pressing importance.

In an ever-globalizing context dominated by the rise of authoritarianism (Berberoglu 2021; Frankenberg & Heitmeyer 2024), totalitarian tendencies to influence journalism practice have risen sharply. Their impact is being felt not only in traditionally autocratic contexts but also in democratic states, as argued by Pajnic & Hrženjak (2024), their study on the influence of authoritarianism on Slovenian journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic showed increasing use of state-sanctioned propagandistic techniques. Repressive regimes are silencing and intimidating journalists using many mechanisms, including imprisonment and cyberattacks. In the broader context of authoritarian regimes, the chances of journalists getting harassed, or their stories being dismissed simply as 'fake news' are extremely high, recent research shows (Tshuma et al. 2024).

Historically, democratic countries such as the Netherlands, ranked third behind Norway and Estonia in the current Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom rankings have taken the lead in protecting independent journalists around the world. Failure to do so not only galvanizes autocratic rulers around the world but it also raises serious questions about the sustainability of and trust in democratic systems. The Dutch government recognizes that independent journalists, operating free from government influence, play an important role because, through their work, they defend citizens' right to freedom of expression. Indeed, the Netherlands' status as a longstanding member of the 47-country Human Rights Council, a United Nations body charged with protecting human rights around the world, makes it an appropriate data collection setting for this project.

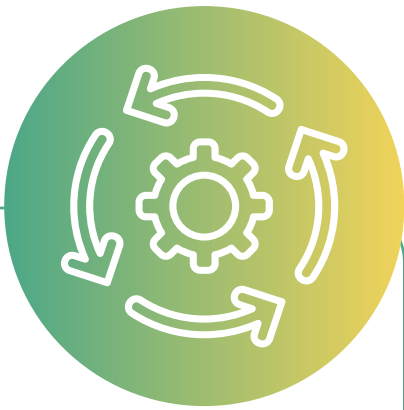
What is journalism?

Journalism is undergoing major changes with new actors coming into prominence (Hölsgens et al. 2020) and the dominance of traditional newsrooms as the only avenues of journalistic production has been questioned (Deuze & Witschge 2019). But in a modern world dominated by ubiquitous social media and digital technology, there are far too many people laying claims to journalism, while the ethics of journalism are not being practiced, making information shared by these 'journalists' open to speculation. For example, social media influencers are increasingly claiming to be journalists, or, as research from seven Arab countries including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia revealed, their followers see them as such (Martin & Sharma 2022). The claim that there is a strong correlation between the consumption of legacy news and the use of Social Media Information as sources of news. Still, it would be unreasonable to think journalism only refers to traditional forms because (especially) in authoritarian countries, audiences are coming to trust influencers to provide accurate accounts over journalists working for state media (Degen et al. 2024).

In fact, what we see in conflict countries is that non-professionals considered in the West as being on the periphery such as social media influencers are in fact seen in countries as Mali as core and genuine providers of news (De Bruijn et al. 2025). Some even suggest journalism and activism are, in fact, the same thing (Russell 2016). Zelizer (2005: 68) sees journalism as "phenomenon with volume, materiality, dimension, depth, and complexity." Admitting that what should be considered journalistic endeavor "remains elusive," Shapiro (2014: 555) suggests journalism is the "pursuit of accurate information about current or recent events and its original presentation for public edification. While admitting journalism pursues accuracy or truth (Parks 2022), Mutsvairo & Skare Orgeret (2023) add that those interested in defining journalism should also consider context because in authoritarian countries, truth-telling enrages authorities, putting the lives of journalists, such as those that flee into exile, at risk. The AI turn has multiple benefits for journalism including "an off-ramp to escape the hamster wheel, break away from tired routine, re-evaluate what it means to do good work and stay informed, and, overall, to more thoughtfully apply technology where it can create value in journalistic work and resist or refuse it where it cannot" (Dodds et. al 2025). Before the benefits of AI in journalism can be fully realized, there is need to invest in AI-focused education for journalists (Hollanek et al. 2025).

Methodology





The methodology was designed to capture both breadth, through a network-wide survey, and depth, through targeted interviews with selected organizations.



Survey Component

An online survey was conducted in January 2024 within the Vine network, RNW Media’s global community of digital media actors. The survey yielded 28 responses from professionals active in the development and digital media sectors. Respondents represented a wide range of organizational types, including independent media outlets, NGOs, and hybrid structures, and were geographically diverse, spanning Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Latin America, and Asia. This was supplemented with research results conducted by RNW Media in 2023, where 24 responses from global development and digital media practitioners were gathered regarding adoption of AI in their media work.

The survey instruments focused on:

- Current uses of AI and digital technologies;
- Perceived benefits and challenges;
- Organizational strategies for financial and editorial sustainability;
- Views on donor relationships, audience engagement, and ethical concerns.



Interview Component

To complement the survey, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives or professionals working with media organizations in Burundi, Lebanon, Kenya, Mali, Cuba, India, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and one Europe-based organisation.. These interviews provided richer contextual insights into the strategies, dilemmas, and everyday practices of independent media operating in restrictive or resource-scarce environments. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing flexibility to probe into local specificities while maintaining comparability across cases.



Analytical Approach

Survey data were analyzed descriptively to identify recurring trends in AI adoption and media viability strategies. Interview transcripts were coded thematically, guided by both the research questions and emergent themes from the data. A comparative analysis was conducted to highlight regional specificities while also identifying cross-cutting challenges and strategies.



Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, because the survey was distributed within the Vine network, the sample is not representative of all independent media globally; rather, it reflects practitioners connected to RNW Media’s training and community initiatives. Second, the survey was conducted in English, which may have limited accessibility for some respondents, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts. Third, the rapidly evolving nature of AI technologies means that findings represent a snapshot in time, rather than long-term patterns.



Research Ethics and Positionality

Given that many participants operate in restrictive political environments, care was taken to anonymize sensitive responses and protect the confidentiality of interviewees. Participation was voluntary, and verbal and written informed consent, was obtained prior to data collection. The research was conducted by RNW Media; this positionality brings both advantages, close access to practitioners, and limitations, as the dual role of facilitator and researcher may influence how findings are interpreted. Reflexivity regarding this position is therefore integral to the analysis presented in this report.

Executive
summary

Introduction

Literature
review

Methodology

Main
findings

Cross-cutting
insights

Further
research

Conclusion

Main Findings





“Publishing in local languages, rather than defaulting to English or French, boosts relevance and reach. In places like Burundi, DRC, and Mali, language inclusivity is tied to cultural resonance and credibility.”

Adrien Trocme, Regional Manager West and Central Africa, VNG International



The findings from the survey of 28 practitioners and eight organizational interviews reveal that media viability is shaped by interrelated factors: financial independence, trust and credibility, structural/legal environments, innovation and technology, and organizational capacity. This section presents the evidence under these thematic dimensions, with regional examples illustrating each. Findings from the interviews also revealed that language was a key component to building and maintaining trust. The interviewees suggested that once content was translated to English, the potential for societal impact was affected.

Based on participants responses and our analysis, we conclude that digital media professionals are starting to use AI technologies increasingly for different aspects of their work, especially finding great benefits when it comes to productivity and enhancing their skills for creativity and strategic approaches. Ruba Mini, an RNTC trainer noted that tech-driven operational models were essential partners to she worked with accomplish financial sustainability. “She stated that moving from donor dependence to self-generated income is a long journey. Models like The Guardian take years to cultivate reader revenue. The issue is structural: partners weren’t sufficiently prepared, and support for sustainability was too limited.” Mini is adamant that small scale media players, particularly those based in increasingly restrictive non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) context, need to partner with big-name digital players such as Google, arguing that doing so can be “transformative.” “For instance, Google offers grants, but local platforms often lack awareness or capacity to access them. Equipping teams to engage proactively with such actors is key.”

“Not editorially, but we’re building an AI supported editor tool. It’ll help with grammar, tone, and checking if the content meets reader needs. We also use AI for proposal writing and text analysis, but never input personal data or anything sensitive.”

Carla Allenbach, managing director at the European Correspondent



Magdalena Aguilar, founder Tiki taka Impact, considers credibility and consistency as important ingredients toward achieving both financial and media viability for independent media players. “There was a recent example in Argentina where the president promoted a cryptocurrency on X . It turned into a scandal after an interview was cut short under pressure. The journalist’s credibility took a hit because they agreed to censor themselves. That’s a big problem.” She said that journalistic objectivity is a myth, adding that many media consumers are aware that content produced by media players is not neutral.

Investing in local languages is key to the survival of media outlets in the Global South, Arti Shukla, Creative director at Love Matters India suggested. “Local language is key. At minimum, content should be bilingual. English can work, but regional languages increase reach. As for AI, people tolerate it in tools like chatbots, but the real issue is people not knowing when they’re consuming AI-generated content, which can be harmful in sensitive topics like health”.

Achieving media viability isn’t a straightforward mission. China-based Chunzi Yuan of Justice4her says media viability means “survival.” “The biggest challenge is for independent creators or public-interest media to find ways to survive, perhaps by engaging with the business world, like collaborating with private companies to sell services or advertising space. But it’s tough.” Despite the restrictive Chinese environment, Chunzi notes that others are thriving. “One role model I often think of is a Chinese feminist content creator known as “Alex.” She has a strong personal brand, great communication skills, and over 3 million followers. She’s secured deals in sectors like maternal health and fitness. Her team is small, about four or five people, which makes it manageable and stable.”

Key factors for media viability

1

Financial Independence and Funding Models

Across contexts, respondents consistently identified financial independence as the cornerstone of viability. Reliance on donor funding emerged as the most significant constraint: 81% of surveyed outlets depend primarily on project-based grants, which limit long-term planning and reinforce dependency loops.

- In Libya and Syria, participants noted that donor-driven agendas often leave little space for locally relevant priorities. Early engagement of media actors in program ideation was seen as essential to mitigate this mismatch.
- Hybrid structures emerged as a promising alternative. El Toque, operating across Cuba, Spain, and the U.S., sustains itself by combining a nonprofit editorial core with a for-profit digital agency. This dual model enables editorial independence while diversifying revenue streams.
- Smaller grassroots outlets, particularly in Nigeria and the DRC, reported being excluded from institutional grants due to bureaucratic and legal barriers. These exclusions deepen the gap between well-networked organizations and local actors.

These findings underline that donor reliance is not just a financial issue but a structural factor that directly conditions editorial independence and organizational resilience.

2

Editorial Independence, Trust and Credibility

The erosion of trust was another major theme. 60% of respondents reported instances of self-censorship or editorial compromise, typically due to fear of political or financial repercussions.

- In Argentina, the scandal surrounding a journalist who cut short an interview under political pressure illustrates how fragile credibility can be, and how quickly audience trust can be lost.
- In Kenya and Nigeria, respondents linked self-censorship directly to financial vulnerability: when outlets rely on political advertisers or precarious donor funding, their ability to publish critical content is compromised.
- Several interviewees argued that while journalistic objectivity may be a myth, transparency and consistency remain critical for maintaining credibility.

These findings suggest that financial precarity and editorial independence are intertwined: without diversified and autonomous funding, outlets struggle to safeguard credibility, which is itself a prerequisite for audience loyalty and long-term viability.

3

Structural and Legal Environments

Legal frameworks play a decisive role in enabling or constraining media viability. 67% of outlets surveyed are registered as NGOs or CSOs, a status that often restricts them from generating commercial revenue.

- In India, NGO registration prevents independent media from developing viable commercial models, forcing them into donor dependency.
- In the DRC, outlets highlighted how delays in access to tools such as ChatGPT compounded existing infrastructural barriers, limiting their ability to compete with better-resourced organizations.
- Regional umbrella structures and diaspora hubs emerged as partial solutions, providing shared legal and financial infrastructures to counteract restrictive national laws.

These cases show how regulatory environments are not neutral but actively shape the possibilities for financial and editorial autonomy.

4

Innovation, Technology and AI Integration

While structural challenges dominate, many outlets are also experimenting with AI as a tool for innovation. Survey data indicate that 86% of respondents regularly use ChatGPT, though most lack formal strategies or ethical frameworks.

- Raseef22 (MENA) integrates AI into translation, SEO, and voice narration, expanding linguistic reach and accessibility for visually impaired audiences.
- Love Matters Africa (Kenya) uses AI image generation to produce culturally resonant visuals, aligning content with local audiences' identities and interests.
- Reach a Hand Uganda (RAHU) deploys an AI chatbot via WhatsApp to provide confidential reproductive health information to youth, demonstrating how AI can expand reach on sensitive topics.

Yet challenges persist: respondents cited concerns about bias, depersonalization, loss of creativity and trust related to content. Some reported that AI-generated content lacked the uniqueness required to align with their brand identity, underscoring the need for iterative refinement and ethical guardrails.

5

Organizational Capacity and Leadership

A final cross-cutting finding concerns the human infrastructure of media organizations. Respondents stressed that media viability requires more than journalistic skill; it depends equally on entrepreneurial and managerial capacities.

- Outlets in Switzerland and Syria demonstrated that dedicated business roles significantly improved resilience.
- Gender-diverse and youth-led leadership models were linked to greater audience trust and relevance. Donors increasingly favor such initiatives, indicating an alignment between inclusivity and viability.

These insights highlight that building viability is not solely a financial or technological matter but also an organizational and cultural one.



Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that media viability is multidimensional:

- Financial independence is necessary but insufficient without trust.
- Editorial credibility is vulnerable to both political repression and economic dependency.
- Legal and structural frameworks can either entrench precarity or create enabling conditions.
- AI and innovation offer opportunities, but only if implemented with ethical safeguards and contextual sensitivity.
- Organizational leadership, especially when diverse and entrepreneurial, emerges as a decisive factor in adapting to change.
- Language plays a key role with the use of local language being considered more impactful than other languages such as English.

These dimensions are deeply interlinked: structural and financial pressures shape editorial choices; credibility influences audience loyalty; and innovation depends on organizational capacity. Media viability for this research, and more broadly, therefore, cannot be reduced to a single factor but must be approached holistically, recognizing the interplay of financial, political, technological, language, trust, and human dynamics. Media viability thrives when we underscore the urgent need to support the adoption AI in ways that aid, as opposed to restricting media outlet to thrive.

Executive
summary

Introduction

Literature
review

Methodology

Main
findings

Cross-cutting
insights

Further
research

Conclusion

Cross-cutting Insights





The regional findings underscore that media viability cannot be reduced to a single dimension such as financial independence or technological innovation. Instead, it emerges from the interaction of financial, political, technological, and organizational factors. This section synthesizes comparative insights across regions, identifying the common ingredients that shape the sustainability of independent media.

1

Financial Independence as a Precondition

Across all regions, financial independence was consistently identified as the foundation of media viability. Donor-driven funding cycles create uncertainty, reinforce dependency, and constrain editorial freedom. Results show that while hybrid models (e.g., El Toque's nonprofit/for-profit dual structure) show promise, they remain the exception rather than the rule.

Insight

Without diversified and autonomous revenue streams, independent media remain structurally vulnerable, regardless of their innovation or audience engagement strategies.

2

Editorial Integrity and Audience Trust

Trust and credibility surfaced as equally indispensable to viability. When financial or political pressures erode editorial independence, as seen in Argentina, Kenya, and Nigeria, audience trust collapses. In turn, the absence of trust undermines the feasibility of audience-based revenue models such as donations or subscriptions. This makes the discrediting of pro-Trump media regimes and those from other right wing political leaders in democratic societies potentially harmful given they actively undermine potential income generation from audience-based revenue models. It's important to mention, however, that audience-based revenue isn't always the lone solution because there is an inherent and non-negotiable understanding in some countries that that journalists should operate in a free environment, which complicates alternative funding models.

Insight

Editorial integrity is not a luxury but a strategic asset. Credibility builds the foundation for financial sustainability and long-term audience loyalty.

3

Structural and Legal Environments as Enablers or Constraints

Legal frameworks significantly condition the viability of independent media. In contexts where outlets are forced into NGO/CSO registration, commercial innovation is legally restricted. Bureaucratic barriers also exclude grassroots media from accessing institutional grants. In contrast, diaspora hubs and regional umbrella structures illustrate how collective arrangements can overcome restrictive national laws.

Insight

Media viability is not only a matter of internal strategy but also of structural opportunity. Enabling legal frameworks are as critical as funding for long-term sustainability.

4

Innovation and AI as Double-Edged Tools

AI adoption is widespread, 86% of respondents reported using ChatGPT, but uneven. While outlets understand AI's potential for translation, contextualized imagery, and youth engagement, others warn of ethical risks: bias, depersonalization, and creative dilution. Moreover, access remains unequal; practitioners in the Global South, for instance, only gained access to AI tools long after their Global North counterparts.

Insight

AI is a catalyst for efficiency and creativity, but without ethical frameworks and equitable access, it risks amplifying existing inequalities rather than mitigating them.

5

Organizational Capacity and Leadership Diversity

Entrepreneurial skills and inclusive leadership consistently surfaced as decisive factors. Outlets with dedicated business roles, or with leadership structures inclusive of all genders and youth, were more resilient in both financial and editorial terms. Donors increasingly reward such models, but many small-scale outlets lack the resources to invest in organizational capacity.

Insight

Media viability depends as much on human and organizational capital as on financial or technological resources. Leadership diversity and entrepreneurial capacity enhance adaptability and trust.

6

Interdependence of Viability Dimensions

Perhaps the most significant cross-cutting insight is the interdependence of the dimensions of viability. Financial independence supports editorial freedom, which in turn sustains trust. Legal frameworks shape financial opportunities, while organizational culture mediates how technology is adopted. None of these dimensions can be considered in isolation.

Insight

Media viability is a holistic process. Strategies that address only one dimension (e.g., financial sustainability without editorial independence, or AI adoption without ethical reflection) are insufficient.



Recommendations

The findings demonstrate that media viability is shaped by multiple, interdependent yet interconnected factors: financial sustainability, editorial integrity, structural/legal frameworks, innovation, and organizational capacity. Addressing these requires action at different levels of the media ecosystem. This section sets out recommendations for three key stakeholder groups: funders, media support organisations, and media organisations themselves.

▸ Funders:

Funders play a decisive role in shaping the conditions under which independent media operate. Current practices, short-term, project-based grants, reinforce dependency and instability. To strengthen media viability, funders should:

- **Shift from project-based to core funding:** Provide long-term, flexible support that allows outlets to invest in institutional capacity, editorial independence, and innovation.
- **Support diversified revenue models:** Encourage hybrid structures (nonprofit + for-profit arms) by funding feasibility studies, legal support, and pilot initiatives.
- **Promote news and content in local languages:** There is a strong preference for the use of local languages, which respondents see as being more impactful for engagement and building trust with audiences.
- **Lower barriers for grassroots actors:** Simplify application procedures, accept alternative forms of legal registration, and earmark funding for smaller, community-based outlets.
- **Invest in business and leadership skills:** Fund capacity-building in financial management, entrepreneurship, and digital strategy, recognizing that journalistic talent alone is insufficient for viability.
- **Promote ethical innovation:** Require and support AI strategies that address bias, privacy, and inclusivity, ensuring that technological adoption does not undermine trust.



Recommendations

Media Development Organisations:

Media support organisations (MSOs), training institutes, accelerators, and international NGOs, are intermediaries that translate funding into capacity-building and advocacy. They have a dual role: enabling access to resources and strengthening ecosystems. Recommendations include:

- **Facilitate regional hubs and shared infrastructures:** Create umbrella structures that allow small outlets to pool resources (legal registration, financial services, tech support).
- **Localize support and knowledge exchange:** Move beyond one-size-fits-all models by fostering regionally tailored approaches to media viability, attentive to local languages, trust dynamics, and audience behaviors.
- **Build bridges to technology actors:** Act as connectors between small-scale outlets and large digital platforms (Google, OpenAI, Meta), lowering access barriers to grants and tools.
- **Mainstream ethical AI practices:** Provide training, guidelines, and case studies on responsible AI integration, emphasizing cultural sensitivity, privacy, and transparency.
- **Advocate for enabling policies:** Use their convening power to engage governments and international bodies on legal reforms that remove barriers to media entrepreneurship and independent revenue generation.



Recommendations

▸ Media Organizations:

Independent media outlets themselves are not passive recipients but active agents of viability. Based on the findings, key recommendations for practitioners include:

- **Diversify revenue streams:** Explore service provision (e.g., training, consultancy, content production for NGOs/UN), audience-based models (subscriptions, crowdfunding, diaspora engagement), and auxiliary ventures (cafés, apps, creative services).
- **Invest in credibility and trust:** Adopt transparency practices (disclosing funding sources, corrections policies), and resist compromises that erode editorial independence. Trust is not just ethical, it is strategic.
- **Experiment with AI responsibly:** Use AI to improve efficiency (translation, SEO, data analysis), while refining prompts, maintaining editorial oversight, and embedding ethical safeguards to prevent depersonalization or bias.
- **Strengthen entrepreneurial capacity:** Appoint or train dedicated staff for business development and strategic planning, recognizing viability as both a journalistic and a financial challenge.
- **Prioritize leadership diversity:** Ensure inclusive governance structures, with gender diversity youth, and underrepresented groups in decision-making roles. Such diversity enhances audience trust and positions outlets favorably with funders.
- **Engage audiences as stakeholders:** Build sustainable models of community engagement, using digital tools (polls, storytelling, e-learning) to cultivate loyalty and, where possible, financial contributions.
- **Preference for local language:** Media produced in local and indigenous languages is considered to be more impactful.

Executive
summary

Introduction

Literature
review

Methodology

Main
findings

Cross-cutting
insights

Further
research

Conclusion

Further Research





This study highlights several important areas for further investigation into media viability and the role of emerging technologies. While the survey and interviews provide valuable insights across diverse contexts, they also reveal the limits of current knowledge and the need for deeper, longitudinal, country specific, and comparative research.

The rapid pace of technological change makes it difficult to assess the long-term impact of AI on media practices. While this study captures a snapshot of adoption in early 2024-25, longitudinal research is needed to track how AI integration evolves over time, how outlets refine their strategies, and what unintended consequences emerge. Such studies should examine not only technical efficiency but also shifts in editorial workflows, audience relationships, and labor dynamics.

Trust emerged as a central ingredient of media viability, yet little is known about how audiences perceive AI-generated or AI-assisted content. Future research should explore whether audiences distinguish between human- and AI-produced content, how this affects credibility, and what communication strategies outlets can adopt to maintain or strengthen trust when using AI.

Findings from India, the DRC, and other restrictive contexts show how legal frameworks constrain revenue generation. Comparative studies could map the impact of different regulatory environments on media viability, identifying which legal arrangements enable hybrid financial models and which entrench dependency. Such work would provide evidence for policy advocacy and reform.

Interview data suggest that leadership diversity enhances audience trust and organizational resilience. However, systematic evidence on the relationship between gender, youth leadership, and media viability remains scarce. Future research should investigate how leadership structures influence organizational culture, decision-making, and funding opportunities across different contexts.

The findings underscore a recurring gap in existing scholarship: the lack of localized perspectives. Much research on AI and media viability remains Global North-centric, overlooking the realities of small-scale outlets in fragile or repressive contexts. Further research should prioritize underrepresented regions, languages & cultures and forms of media, with particular attention to the asymmetrical power dynamics in funder-recipient relationships.

Conclusion





This study has examined how digitally-driven independent journalism actors across diverse regions are navigating the intersecting challenges of financial precarity, editorial pressure, restrictive legal frameworks, and rapid technological change. The report focused mostly on repressive and under-resourced contexts, focusing on how financial models, editorial integrity, structural barriers, and technological innovation are key ingredients to saving the potential collapse of journalism. While the contexts vary significantly, the findings converge on a central insight: media viability is multidimensional and interdependent. Financial independence, editorial integrity, structural opportunity, innovation, and organizational capacity cannot be addressed in isolation. Each reinforces the other, and weaknesses in one dimension undermine progress in the others. Language is an important component of media viability with a strong preference of local languages remaining a dominating theme of this report.

Artificial intelligence complicates this dynamic. For many outlets, AI offers practical solutions to resource constraints, enabling efficiency in translation, content production, and audience engagement. Yet without ethical guardrails, strategic planning, and equitable access, AI risks reproducing existing inequalities and eroding the credibility on which independent media depend. Thus, technology alone cannot secure viability; it must be integrated into broader strategies that prioritize trust, inclusion, and resilience.

The report also underscores the importance of structural conditions. Donor-driven funding, restrictive legal frameworks, and exclusionary bureaucratic barriers continue to entrench dependency and limit innovation. At the same time, examples such as hybrid nonprofit/for-profit models, diaspora-based financing, and inclusive leadership demonstrate that alternative pathways are possible when conditions allow.

Ultimately, securing media viability demands collective action across levels. Funders must reorient toward flexible, long-term support; media support organisations must strengthen infrastructures and regional ecosystems; and independent outlets themselves must combine journalistic integrity with entrepreneurial and innovative practices. Only through such coordinated efforts can independent media not only survive but also thrive; resisting political and financial pressures, maintaining editorial independence, and adapting creatively to a rapidly changing digital environment.

A vibrant and diverse media ecosystem is not simply a technical or financial matter; it is a democratic imperative. Supporting independent media in fragile contexts means investing in the foundations of public trust, information integrity, and civic participation. In this sense, media viability is more than an organizational goal; it is a cornerstone of resilient societies.

References

Adler, P. S., Adly, A., Armanios, D. E., Battilana, J., Bodrožić, Z., Clegg, S., Davis, G. F., Gartenberg, C., Glynn, M. A., Aslan Gümüşay, A., Haveman, H. A., Leonardi, P., Lounsbury, M., McGahan, A. M., Meyer, R., Phillips, N., & Sheppard-Jones, K. (2023). Authoritarianism, Populism, and the Global Retreat of Democracy: A Curated Discussion. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 32 (1) 3-20. doi.org/10.1177/10564926221119395

Akser, M., & Baybars, B. (2022). Repressed media and illiberal politics in Turkey: the persistence of fear. *Southeast European and Black. Sea Studies*, 23(1), 159-177. doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2088647

Álvarez-Ugarte, R. (2022). Supporting Media Viability in the Americas. *Towards Sustainable Journalism* (June 01, 2022). CELE Research Paper No. 54, Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=5157185 or dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5157185

Al Rawi, A (2024), Algorithmic Profiling and the Threat to Religious Expression: The Case of Muslim Pro. *Proceedings of the TPRC2024 The Research Conference on Communications, Information and Internet Policy*, Available at SSRN: ssrn.com/abstract=4901654 or dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4901654

Arafat, R. (2021). Examining Diaspora Journalists' Digital Networks and Role Perceptions: A Case Study of Syrian Post-Conflict Advocacy Journalism. *Journalism Studies*. 22(16): 2174-2196.

Amigo, L., & Porlezza, C. (2025). "Journalism Will Always Need Journalists." *The Perceived Impact of AI on Journalism Authority in Switzerland*. *Journalism Practice*, 19(10), 2266-2284. doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2025.2487534

Berberoglu, B. (2021). The Global Rise of Authoritarianism in the 21st Century Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization and the Nationalist: Crisis of Neoliberal Globalization

de Bruijn M, Mutsvairo M, Bruls L, Galy Cisse M, Langguth J, Orgeret S.K, Schroeder D.T, Moges M & Dialimpa Badji S. (2025). Aren't we all journalists"? Citizen journalism, disinformation and the weaponization of social media in conflict torn Mali. *Journalism*.

Carson A. & Farhall K. (2018). Understanding collaborative investigative journalism in a "post-truth" age. *Journalism Studies*. 19(13) 1899-1911.

Cheeseman, N., Alderman, P., Cianetti, L., Gehrke, M., & Haughton, T. (2023). The rise of authoritarianism is misunderstood – and it matters. *The Centre for Elections, Democracy, Accountability and Representation (CEDAR)*. Retrieved from www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/how-the-global-rise-of-authoritarianism-is-misunderstood-and-why-it-matters

Danso, S., Fosu, M., Serwornoo, M. Y. W., & Ntem, M. T. K. (2024). Collaborative Journalism Around the Globe: A Systematic Review. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 0(0). doi.org/10.1177/10776990241284582

Degen, M., Olgemöller, M., & Zabel, C. (2024). Quality Journalism in Social Media – What We Know and Where We Need to Dig Deeper. *Journalism Studies*, 25(4), 399-420.

Deuze, M. (2005). What is Journalism?: Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered. *Journalism*. 6(4): 442-464.

Deuze, M., and T. Witschge. (2019). *Beyond Journalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Diamond, L., Plattner, M. F., & Walker, C. (2016). *Authoritarianism Goes Global: The Challenge to Democracy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Dodds, T., Arafat, R., & Yeung, W. N. (2024). Bound by Exile: Exploring Kinship Dynamics and Role Perceptions among Diaspora Journalists. *Journalism Studies*. 1-20. doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2024.2366344

Dodds, T., Zamith, R., & Lewis, S. C. (2025). The AI turn in journalism: Disruption, adaptation, and democratic futures. *Journalism*, 0(0). doi.org/10.1177/14648849251343518

DW Academy (2023). What is Media Viability? Retrieved from akademie.dw.com/en/what-is-media-viability/a-65310115

Dragomir, M. (2019). *Journalism in Authoritarian Societies*. Oxford Bibliographies.

van Drunen, M. Z., & Fechner, D. (2022). Safeguarding Editorial Independence in an Automated Media System: The Relationship Between Law and Journalistic Perspectives. *Digital Journalism*. 11(9): 1723-1750.

Frankenberg, G., & Heitmeyer, W. (2024). *Drivers of Authoritarianism Paths and Developments at the Beginning of the 21st Century*. Edward Elgar

Graves, L., & Konieczna, M. (2015). Qualitative Political Communication| Sharing the News: Journalistic Collaboration as Field Repair. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 19. Retrieved from ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3381

Glasius, M. (2018). Extraterritorial Authoritarian Practices: A Framework. *Globalizations*. 15(2): 179-197.

Hamm, A. (2022). New Objects, New Boundaries: How the "Journalism of Things" Reconfigures Collaborative Arrangements, Audience Relations and Knowledge-Based Empowerment. *Digital Journalism* 12(8), 1077-1096.



RIGHT HERE
RIGHT NOW



Utrecht
University