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Finding the funds for journalism to thrive

Policy options to support media viability

In the series:

World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development

Key trends:

- Pluralism and democracy require an economically-viable independent news media. But the world is staring at a growing crisis in the supply of professional journalism for the wider public.
- The traditional business model of the news media has been deeply eroded by a shift in advertising revenues to online platforms.
- Media outlets must intensify efforts towards more inclusive journalism, alternative business models and diversified revenue streams. Urgent action from other actors is also required in order to save – and ideally expand – the range of news providers serving the public.
- Injections of essential revenue for trustworthy journalism can come from donors, public subsidies, and financial support from tech companies. But such investment should come without strings attached.
- Multi-stakeholder task-forces or commissions of inquiry can tailor solutions – and help to prevent new funding from compromising editorial independence.

How can policymakers best respond to the severe financial crisis that threatens the supply of independent journalism and compounds the erosion of press freedom globally? This policy brief offers some answers. It provides a typology of global responses, assesses their pros and cons, and makes 22 actionable recommendations. It builds on the [Windhoek+30 declaration](#), whose principles were endorsed by UNESCO's 193 Member States and welcomed by the UN General Assembly in 2021, which underlines media viability as a core principle of [information as a public good](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a tipping point. It has [killed countless jobs](#) in journalism and hollowed out aspirations to start new outlets for underserved audiences. Ironically, just as the fall-out from COVID-19 has ravaged the supply of news, it has also brought home to everyone [just how important this essential service is](#). But the threat to informed decision-making can be addressed by a range of policy measures to tackle the existential risk to journalism's economic viability.

I. Introduction:

The importance of news media viability

The “viability” of news media can be understood as the ability of institutions (or in some cases, individuals and collectives) to balance income and expenses so that their output of journalism can be sustained. The income may be from earnings, subsidies, donations, etc., but ultimately it must be sufficient to cover the bills and enable continued operation.

Economic viability is crucial because democracy and sustainable development rely on independent and public interest journalism to nourish citizenship, aid open and accountable governance, and expose malfeasance. Investments in training and protecting journalists, and in defending press freedom, are all moot if there is an ever-declining cadre of professionals making their living through public interest journalism.

The reality is that, even before the current viability crisis, there were too few news outlets to serve audiences across the range of languages, localities and communities. Many countries have lacked an inclusive professional journalism system that serves diverse audiences and covers stories of, and for, marginalised communities and people living in poverty. Efforts to support the production of public interest journalism should therefore be framed in a wider perspective of reinvigorating media development more broadly.

The News Media: Information as a Public Good

Joseph E. Stiglitz, Nobel Prize winner

The news media has played a central role in modern society – its traditional function as the “fourth estate” is a critical part of the checks and balances that make democracy work. But more recently, we have come to recognize that the [media is also important](#) to a well-running economy which requires reliable information that is widely disseminated. An effective media is a public good – in the technical sense used by economists, meaning something from which everybody benefits without a final cost to its benefiting anybody in particular, which is called non-rivalrous consumption.

Adapted from a paper presented to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences at the Vatican in May 2021

II. Socio-political context: Attacks on journalism and eroding trust and safety

The pandemic has had a [“drastic impact”](#) on viability, further accelerating the steady declines in advertising (and for newspapers, from physical circulation). Studies show a dramatic shrinkage in newsroom numbers, even in more affluent markets [such as in the US](#). Many existing outlets are in danger of further shrinking or vanishing altogether. This is happening at a time when independent journalism is also being [“drowned out”](#) by the rise and algorithmic powering of other kinds of content, including disinformation, hate speech and conspiracy theories. Yet, without accurate and comprehensive news, both governments and citizens are ill-equipped to deal with challenges such as climate change, global tax evasion, migration, conflict and the pandemic.

In [media market](#) after [media market](#), the severe loss of advertising income by many news media outlets – especially local ones – has culminated nearly two decades of declines of traditional business models for news organizations. The large global or national news organizations from wealthy countries have been better placed to adapt economically and to defend press freedom than their smaller counterparts, especially in developing countries. An emerging cohort of digitally-born news organizations that address professional or elite audiences are also surviving. But there is a bifurcation overall, with examples of a [widening access gap](#) in many societies between well-served wealthy audiences and poorer underserved communities. While some [news media houses have found ways to thrive](#), such as through selling online or operating as non-profit media, advertising-supported cheap or free media for underserved communities has not. And aspirations for creating new news services for marginalised audiences, especially with local news, face a dismal prospect. The picture is as much a crisis of disparity in the provision of sustainable journalism, as a [crisis for the field as a whole](#).

The trend is that those who can pay for news (in dominant languages) and are able to access diverse platforms, will be well served. Meanwhile, in the absence of genuinely independent public service broadcasting – which is already an increasingly endangered species even in places where it does exist – the “information-poor” will be left vulnerable. Unless media development is ramped up, their lot will be crumbs of content – amongst offerings that are skewed by political or commercial interest, complemented perhaps by news from agenda-driven State or foreign broadcast services. Community media, long struggling to make ends meet, and often under-recognised in regulation, is insufficient to fill the gap.

The vacuums in pluralistic and accessible journalism will constitute a knowledge gap. This harms society as a whole, and it makes for a risky vortex in which uncontested disinformation and conspiracy content can “flood the zone” without professional challenge.

All this is happening against a backdrop of a rise of authoritarian [attacks on journalists](#) (on- and off-line),² increasing social and media polarisation, and the viral [spread of dis/misinformation](#).³ [The pandemic's pressures on newsrooms](#) have been doubled by new restrictions as well as direct attacks on the profession, giving rise to [self-censorship and burnout](#). To withstand these kinds of threats, media outlets need not just to be resilient and courageous, but to also have ways to pay their bills. Viability is foundational to pushing back against the shrinking space for journalism.

Financial pressures on media outlets:

- **Migration of advertising revenue to big technology companies**
 - hastening the collapse of longstanding business models for subsidizing news
- **Low incomes among the target audiences**
 - low subscription rates = low audience revenue
- **Dependency on big tech**
 - can increase the risks of more vulnerability to ‘platform capture’, involving frequently changing priorities, and over-reliance on social media for distribution and audience engagement, along with the risk of editorial interference from corporate actors
- **Lack of arms-length government support**
 - politically-driven advertising and subsidy penalises independent media and rewards pro-government counterparts
- **Problems with access to reliable information from government agencies**
 - weakens the record of independent journalism and makes it harder to win audience or donor support
- **Reliance on sporadic, short-term philanthropic funding**
 - may lead to effective reporting projects, but donors shift interests and often avoid longer-term commitment
- **Rising legal spending to resist Strategic Law Suits Against Public Participation (SLAPPS)**
 - adding to costs for protecting journalists, and expenses for investigative journalism projects
- **Increasing digital security costs e.g., training and technology**

² See for example: <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>

³ See also: <https://en.unesco.org/publications/balanceact>

Changing revenue streams

[More and more advertising revenue is going to Google and Facebook](#). This trend is devastating for the many media outlets that have been reliant on this source of revenue. Even despite advertising's decline, 67% of the 165 independent news media outlets in middle income countries surveyed by the Reuters Institute see this revenue as a [“significant source of revenue”](#), and 38% reported adverts as their single most important source of revenue, highlighting a severe vulnerability in this regard.

Various initiatives are seeking ways to better compete for ad revenue. The [Ads for News](#) coalition, run by media development organization Internews, tries to encourage brands to advertise directly with the news media. This is rather than the use of [“programmatically advertising”](#), that involves the automation of advertising sales and placement, which can cause reputational harm to brands – and has also been found to [financially benefit the producers](#) of online hate speech, mis/disinformation, and [“junk news”](#). The [Check My Ads Institute](#) seeks to demand accountability from “ad tech” operators, especially Google and Facebook (now named Meta) by urging them to de-platform disinformation purveyors. The aim is that these actors' sites or channels are excluded in principle from automated advertising exchanges. This is seen as an “upstream” preference to the alternative practice of keyword blocking by advertising companies, since systems that block advertising being placed next to identified words can not only penalise hate-mongers based on their content, but also prevent news from getting adverts where the reportage includes blacklisted terms. [NewsGuard](#) and the [Journalism Trust Initiative](#) represent other attempts to identify quality news sources through markers, so that advertisers can work directly with such outlets. Some [advertising companies](#) as well as the [World Federation of Advertisers](#) are considering these issues. Still, news media are not expected to recover their former share of advertising.

Indirect benefits from ads can come where the internet companies offer revenue-shares with news providers for advertising placed next to journalistic content. But [Pew Research](#) showed that news producers on YouTube do not make sufficient income from advertising revenue shares, and four out of ten appeal for audience donations. Facebook's [Instant Articles](#) provided so little revenue to publishers that most abandoned it, and it [has come to be used mainly by entities](#) doing click-bait and plagiarism.

In many countries, news organizations are experimenting with non-advertising models to generate revenue, such as subscriptions, memberships and donations. For example, while many South African news outlets [continue to decline](#), others have found [robust subscription and membership models](#), which they [consolidated](#) during the pandemic. On the other hand, subscription models can also have implications for journalism as a public good by rendering quality content less accessible to people living in poverty.

The [COVID crisis affecting news media](#) on a global scale has inspired some ambitious plans to aid journalism. These included: research initiatives to diagnose the problem;⁴ [providing emergency funds](#); the inclusion of journalism outlets in [government stimulus packages](#); [creating an international fund](#) for funding public interest journalism; and passing new regulations that have expanded [tax credits](#) for news subscriptions or required [internet companies to pay for news](#).

Addressing the financing of news is key to revitalising media development more broadly, since many countries have long been without local and independent journalistic services in languages that are accessible for much of their public. This challenge aligns with the ongoing work of [UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication \(IPDC\)](#), which over 40 years has worked to promote media development where it is most needed.

Media transformation matters

The pandemic [affected women journalists more acutely](#) than men, as many were responsible for child care and homeschooling while working. [Others were laid off](#) leading to fears that these losses could set back women's advancement. Some donor efforts to support media viability during the pandemic sought to promote women and marginalised groups in ownership and operations, but these approaches were seldom mainstreamed. As regards diversity, the [Black Lives Matter movement](#) was a catalyst for reflection about failures in many news organizations and media systems. Meanwhile, a range of news media still have issues of poor professionalism to confront, such as cases where political, business or personal interests skew their independence and reduce their credibility and societal value. These issues signal that the contemporary challenge is not just a question of saving existing news producers, but also of fostering their transformation. The urgency of stimulating expansion of the sector in order to ensure a multiplicity of news ventures serving society in its entirety is also underlined. Ensuring quality journalism is a key component for securing viability for individual enterprises, and is becoming an imperative for media development support going ahead.

Time for urgent action

The time for action to address the news media viability crisis is now. As the spectre of retrenchment and closure of news outlets continues to materialise, it is increasingly hard to reverse. Action will require news media themselves to intensify efforts towards more inclusive journalism, alternative business models and diversified revenue

⁴ For example, [Economist Impact 2022](#); Free Press Unlimited 2021 [National consultations on solutions to promote media viability while preserving media independence](#); Forum on Information & Democracy. 2021. [A New Deal for Journalism](#); SANEF (2021) [Media Sustainability and Access to Public Interest Journalism: Strategies and Considerations](#); Anya Schiffrin, Hannah Clifford, and Theodora Dame Adjin-Tetty 2022. [Saving Journalism 2: Global Strategies and a Look at Investigative Journalism](#); International Center For Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism's '[Journalism and the Pandemic Project](#)'. (2020–2022)

streams. But solutions will also require steps from governments, internet companies that mediate news content and/or control advertising and marketing systems, and donors. The overall objective must be to enable dramatic increases in financial flows for journalism, as well as wider regulatory changes conducive to press freedom and media viability.

Problems for governments when media is underfunded:



Missed opportunities for growth of the creative economy and attraction of inward investment; whereas, as well proved, state investment can stimulate innovation and sustainable growth.



Lack of public and reliable news in an information system characterized by mis- and disinformation, which weakens efforts to navigate immense challenges like climate change and global instability.



Damage to credibility and trust in society at large: if media are weak and not trusted, other institutions become more vulnerable to damaging ignorance, rumour or disinformation.



Inadequate coverage of organised crime, human rights violations and environmental crime, creates a problem for rule of law for governments.



Risk of instrumentalisation where weak news outlets become prey to political ambitions, leading to hyper-partisan media and a shortage of reliable information for all.



Lack of independent watchdogs that cover government affairs authoritatively and convincingly: such journalism strengthens accountability. Conversely, where it gives credit to the authorities, this carries real weight.

Investment in media viability pays off. Four decades of research demonstrate the important role that independent public interest news media play in promoting sustainable development and democratic governance.⁵ The human and financial cost incurred by the pandemic highlighted the real value of accurate, trustworthy information – especially in the face of the [proliferation of mis/disinformation about COVID-19](#) and vaccine safety/effectiveness. This understanding has contributed to growing interest in democracies for government support for independent media, so that it can provide credible information in the public interest and counter costly falsehoods.

⁵ A number of studies underscore the impact of quality information on government accountability, corruption, voter turnout and voter behavior among other topics. For example, research carried out in Brazil shows that politicians revealed as corrupt are less likely to be reelected (Ferraz & Finan, 2011; Ferraz & Finan, 2008). Newer research also examines persuasion effects and the effect of new information on citizen decision-making (Larreguy and Marshall, 2019).

Solutions tried around the world to support diversity of quality information

- Official subsidies for private news media to help diversity of outlets/information.
→ RISKS: Propping up some outlets that have weak business models and no significant audience.
- Indirect aid such as tax relief, public service/community media grants, reform of state advertising.
→ RISKS: Can be used by governments to compromise editorial integrity.
- Corporate charity.
→ RISKS: Can be used as a PR and brand building strategy for the donors and lead to reduced scrutiny of these companies.
- Compulsory negotiations between tech companies and news publishers.
→ RISKS: Can disproportionately benefit incumbent and successful outlets.
- State and donor support for journalism innovation.
→ RISKS: Can lead to 'shiny things syndrome' instead of strategic and sustainable innovation.

III. Looking to the internet companies

Recent years have seen a growing consensus that the big internet companies need to help support news everywhere for a range of reasons. The questions are how much, and how such funds should best be channeled, and with what oversight.

Responding partly to this context, Google and Facebook have been giving money directly to fact-checking initiatives and journalism outlets in selected countries, and especially the US, while simultaneously allowing disinformation to flourish on their platforms.

In 2020, the two companies escalated their respective grant-making to journalism, including through the Google News Initiative and the Facebook Journalism Project. This became a source of emergency support – especially for US and European newsrooms – in the early stages of the pandemic. An amount of \$216 million of emergency funding from the two companies claimed to reach around 7000 newsrooms and fact-checking organizations – mostly in developed economies. Facebook's Journalism Project, in partnership with WAN-IFRA, has supported business transformation accelerator programmes such as for print publication Bisnis Indonesia, and a range of initiatives in Latin America facilitated by ICFJ.

In a range of countries, news outlets have received both financial aid and training and mentorship programs (an example being the Indonesia Training Network). While a number of these contributions do not directly address the viability issues, they can be a contributing factor to successful digital transformation.

In this context, with [mounting concerns about platform capture](#) and the need to ensure the arms length, fair and transparent distribution of such funds, momentum has emerged for an independent global entity to manage these processes. The independently-governed [International Fund for Public Interest Media](#) may limit the extent to which corporate and other donors leverage editorial influence and public relations advantage. It could also help ensure that funding is allocated independently of donor agendas. The Fund could also serve as an alternative to the platforms' contributions aligning with countries where they lobby extensively, and reduce fragmented or duplicative grants.



Arguments as to why Big Tech should help pay for news:

- Part of their operations are in the news and information businesses, but depend on the work of news outlets which carry the burden of costly regulations such as local content and other public service obligations in the case of broadcasting.
- The companies receive most of the advertising revenue and control the biggest automated ad exchanges.
- They use their power as an intermediary (i.e. via control of app-stores) to take huge cuts from the cost of subscriptions.
- They create societal costs by effectively allowing and even amplifying broad dissemination of dis/misinformation online, notwithstanding their moderation efforts.
- Their systems also incentivise this kind of content with advertising revenue.

Compelling Google and Facebook to pay for news

Competition authorities are focused on the threats that Google and Meta pose to [competition](#) including in relation to advertising, cross-ownership, and conflict of interest. Actions by different [competition authorities](#) and new laws such as the [EU Copyright Directive](#), have not been specifically designed with journalism entities in mind, but they may in some ways help to resource journalism.

Australia's Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) designed the [News Media Bargaining Code](#) which requires Google and Facebook to pay publishers for the news that they disseminate online, and which was enacted in February 2021. If the two sides cannot agree on a price, then they have to go into "final offer arbitration". This form of arbitration is used widely in Australia during labour negotiations because it forces two sides to move closely together and therefore makes agreements more likely and, usually, fairer to both parties. In 2021 government officials in Canada, Italy and South Africa said they might [emulate](#) Australia's 2021 approach. In [South Africa](#), a news industry coalition is seeking to enlist similar support from their countries' competition regulator. Senegalese regulators and organizations have been looking for ways to adapt and implement Australia's News Media Bargaining Code.

Other possible measures have been proposed to guarantee big tech support for media viability. These include [taxes on microtargeting](#), given that this kind of targeting has been associated with social harms such as compromised elections. Another idea is a special ‘social tax’ to offset potentially harmful impact, and which could fund journalism investment schemes overseen by independent agencies. Similarly, the International Federation of Journalists has called for a [tax on Big Tech](#) to fund journalism. The imperative would be that such funding for journalism would be distributed through arms-length mechanisms that exclude capture by either the companies, the government or the beneficiaries.⁶

IV. Public subsidy: Opportunities and risks

During the pandemic, some governments expanded their economic support for news, using mechanisms of direct and indirect [public subsidy](#). For example, in El Salvador, the government [deferred tax payments](#) for businesses, including news media organizations; in Namibia and Nigeria, the COVID-19 stimulus package covered all types of organizations. The Covid stimulus packages in Brazil and El Salvador also benefited the news media, although not directly. In [Greece](#), pro-government media benefited disproportionately. In many cases, mechanisms to ensure that such funding is not instrumentalised were often absent or too opaque for oversight to be exercised.

Many countries in the Global South do not have direct subsidies for news media organizations, with exceptions such as government subsidies to State-owned media.

Governments that had systems in place to support public interest journalism, such as Canada, Norway, France and other parts of [the EU](#), expanded those programs in 2020 – some through direct grants to outlets or individual journalists, some through tax credits. Such measures include funding given to individuals to help pay for subscriptions and tax credits, and reduced taxes for news outlets to encourage retention of editorial staff and new hires. In the US, there has been a call for the creation of a [Local Journalism Initiative](#) fund that would give \$32–35 billion a year for local news, and be administered by the US Post Office. Some argue that any outlets which receive government funds should be required to make some of their content paywall free, in order to ensure that it can be equitably distributed, and also that the money be targeted demonstrably to supporting news costs and not go into the pockets of media owners.

⁶ Organizations like the [International Center for Journalists](#) (ICFJ), the [South African National Editors Forum](#) and the [European Journalism Centre](#) have managed programmes to distribute funding internationally. Since then, the International Fund for Public Interest Media has been created.

Tax Credits to help existing outlets of all sizes

Indonesia	As part of the July 2020 COVID-19 stimulus package the government abolished VAT on newsprint, provided corporate tax relief, exempted income tax on media workers earning under IDR 200 million (\$13,800) a year, and instructed all ministries to divert their advertising budgets to local media companies.
France	Effective May 2021, new subscribers to titles that provide political and general information, whether print or digital, can receive a 30% tax credit on their subscription.
US	The proposed Local Journalism Sustainability Act, reintroduced in 2021, includes a five-year non-refundable tax credit of up to \$250 that helps cover the cost of subscriptions to local newspapers.
Canada	The tax subsidy program provides potential support to qualified Canadian Journalism Organizations (QJCO) through labour tax credits and a 15% non-refundable personal tax credit to individuals subscribing to digital news, as long as the subscription is paid for before 2025.
Lebanon	There are tax exemptions for news organizations, forming part of a national exemption scheme which makes news media exempt from corporate income tax and certain dividend taxes.
Tunisia	Tunisia has implemented tax exemptions and reductions for news media. All recently established companies (including media organizations) can claim tax exemptions in the first four years and all start-up costs are deductible.
Colombia	Colombia saw an unsuccessful initiative for a bill to scrap tax on advertising for media outlets for several years, also exempt media outlets from income tax for 20 years, and offer economic incentives on subscriptions and payroll.

Government policies and local news deserts: a taxonomy of solutions

Government policy intervention to address problems such as rapidly expanding local news deserts where these exist can cover a range of areas. Each would need to be adapted depending on the context. In the US, the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University has listed of some of the measures being proposed:

- i. Mandating internet companies to compensate news organizations when their content is used on the platforms. While this could bring in revenue for news production, it does not necessarily promote public interest or factually correct news. Nor does it curb negative consequences for the information ecosystem arising from the operations and externalities of the companies themselves – including how their functioning serves to overshadow journalism and facilitate attacks on journalists including with epithets such as “fake news” and “presstitute”.
- ii. Reviving advertising as a revenue source, which would likely require news outlets to overcome rivalry to develop industry-wide systems and propositions to advertisers.
- iii. Relaxing antitrust rules for news organizations to enable collective bargaining so that news providers can unite to negotiate prices with the platforms for use of their content.
- iv. Provision of direct government support to news outlets. However, this could damage the independence of local news.
- v. Government subsidies or funding for news outlets including tax-code changes to create tax credits and other advantages, as well as possible deductibility for subscriptions; which again could limit independence and have a limited benefit for lower income households.
- vi. Easing rules to allow existing commercial outlets to become non-profit or hybrid entities. This would allow outlets to have greater shares of local ownership, make them eligible for tax breaks and encourage more local coverage.
- vii. Diversifying the mediums used by independent publicly funded media to include e.g., radio/podcasts.

European copyright directives

Copyright directives are not designed to help save journalism but to make sure there is remuneration for the value of the content to those who generate and/or own it. Cases include:

Germany Implementing European Digital Single Market Directive

France Fined Google 500 million euros in July 2021 for not complying with the country's copyright regulations

In this context, in late 2020 Google announced what it called a billion dollar initiative to support more than 450 outlets. However, the initiative did not defuse the momentum for European copyright enforcement.

Risk of media capture

In many countries, the question is how assistance from governments can be given without compromising editorial independence – or reinforcing compromised media outlets. Subsidy policies that may work well in some countries are not necessarily desired by journalists – or audiences – in several other parts of the world. Direct government investment in news media viability can be [problematic](#), especially in contexts where press freedom standards are weak. One example of the risks associated with governments directly funding news organizations is the problem of [media capture](#). This occurs when powerful media owners actively support governments through soft or hard censorship. For example, in exchange for supporting government policies, media owners may be given financial benefits such as government contracts and state advertising. When an outlet becomes ‘captured’, the editorial values of independence, impartiality and fairness are eroded, along with audience trust. Media plurality and diversity is threatened. This leads to independent outlets being cut off from advertising placement by government and captured private sector entities, although it is these independent media who would typically resist government funding with strings attached.

National enquiries can help governments decide how to support quality information

There are often different views about how best to ensure the viability of a diverse supply and distribution of journalism. One mechanism to link up interests and find common ground is to create a consultative national commission or taskforce that undertakes a thorough enquiry into the problem and its practical solutions. This allows for solutions that relate to the political and economic possibilities in a country (or region). An example of such a mechanism is the UK’s Cairncross Review which was commissioned in 2018 to research and make recommendations to help news viability in the UK. The Review [assessed](#) the effects that Big Tech had on media viability and came up with nine recommendations including government subsidies and tax breaks, some of which the government then agreed to – although not the proposal to create an “Arts Council” equivalent to fund local journalism.

International support

State development assistance agencies such as Sweden’s [Sida](#), [Global Affairs Canada](#), the US’ [USAID](#), the UK’s [FCDO](#), and various agencies of the [EU](#) spent an estimated [US\\$450 million](#) worldwide to support press freedom during 2018. The US-based Center for International Media Assistance ([CIMA](#)) has [argued](#) that these donors needed to double what they were spending to \$1 billion a year. However, although such governmental donor support [rose](#) in some cases during the pandemic, it is still far short of what is needed.

V. Conclusion:

Each country will need to find its own solution

While interventions are urgent, there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to the design, passage and implementation of regulatory and/or other responses to the news media viability crisis. Nor is there a defined ‘end point’ by which all gaps will be solved.

In addition, hard evidence is not yet available as to what works. For example, when it comes to addressing the demand side of the problem (i.e. audience revenue), the data are unclear as to whether subscription vouchers or tax credits are more effective. There is also continuing debate regarding criteria for eligibility for subsidies and the definition of independent journalism. But interventions that wait for evidence may come too late to make a difference. The balance of risk depends not so much on calculus of benefit (where there may be unintended effects), but on whether harm can be anticipated due to either action or inaction.

To move ahead, therefore, it is apparent that attention is needed to building a thriving community of interest and expertise. This can serve as a forum for developing a national diagnosis, and for projecting forward into solutions. The success of subsequent interventions will likely come down to shaping what is actually politically and economically achievable. For example, some countries have systems already set up to support independent public broadcasting, while others adopt more problematic state broadcasting models which are blocked from generating independent news.

In some countries, there is consensus on the need for public support for information that is a public good. In others, citizens may mistrust news media and prioritise what they think of as more pressing needs. Many fear that governments will not strengthen independent journalistic outlets in need, but rather their preferred news suppliers who toe the line. The extent to which publics trust and cherish journalism is critical to what can be done. What is politically feasible in one country may not be possible in another, although some change will always be possible.

Even when the evidence and rights-respecting policies are in place, addressing the supply side in order to underwrite journalism may not address the consumer side. This Policy Brief builds on the idea that making more quality news available will spur consumption, but monitoring and evaluation are necessary. At the same time, because trust in journalism and circulation of quality news services rose during the pandemic, there is a window of opportunity for maintaining and deepening public trust in and appetite for independent journalism – which can also be a strong factor in favour of viability.

All this means that, besides policy measures, media organizations and other institutions generating journalism, and practitioners themselves, have a role to play. They need to reinvent journalism and make it more inclusive and compelling. They are key in building partnerships to ensure the appropriate mix of market- and extra-market resource flows that are sufficient for at least survival, but are also aimed at growth.

How to set up a National Commission to investigate and propose solutions

A checklist drawn from the [Cairncross Review](#):

- Identify the knowledge gap which needs to be filled, and clarify why a report would be necessary
- Secure official engagement from regulatory bodies, parliamentarians and ministers and consult a wide variety of news organizations across the political spectrum
- Meet with stakeholders, media outlets, civil society organizations, academic experts, advertisers, publishers, and tech platforms (among others)
- Issue a public call for evidence
- Commission research to inform the review – in areas such as the current market structure, challenges faced by the press and strategic responses available, as well as research into the digital advertising market
- Produce actionable recommendations for specific actors, proposing both short- and medium-term measures
- Help the industry to help itself – for instance, with interventions that reduce dependence on too few revenue streams
- Set a timeline for next steps after the commission/task force report is concluded, and a date for evaluation of follow-up.

Recommendations for action

The following policy recommendations are offered as guidance for governments, lawmakers, regulators, media and other stakeholders as per their diverse role. All measures taken should include explicit and precise safeguards for editorial independence:

Practical steps

1. Create multi-stakeholder national commissions/task forces to investigate the challenges and propose solutions for mobilising resources.
2. Consider giving tax breaks to local independent news outlets, or vouchers for subscriptions, along with subsidies for hiring local news reporters, especially where the viability of local news is under extreme pressure, or where 'news deserts' have evolved.
3. Provide subsidies for news entities to hire dedicated journalists to report on key issues – such as climate change; municipal affairs; elections and threats to democracy; public health; gender and other diversities, and migration.
4. Avoid cutting the operating budgets of independent public broadcasters (as distinct from State broadcasters), in recognition of the fact that these entities can be especially vital for audiences who are not served by the market.
5. Create incentives for whistleblowing which exposes tax evasion or misuse of public funds, and systemically reward and incentivize journalism institutions that helps governments recover stolen resources.
6. Ensure that government advertising is independently and transparently allocated, based on objective criteria. This may require oversight boards as well as stringent regulations and full transparency.
7. Ensure that public funds for small business, and for digital transformation of enterprises, give attention to independent journalistic enterprise, and encourage private investment and donor aid (e.g. in matching funds), while also avoiding projects that are technology-led rather than technology-empowered.
8. Set up independent expert panels (including stakeholder representation from NGOs, journalists' unions and academia) to award funding to help media viability, ensuring the independence of the process and the monitoring of editorial output that the funding has helped enable.

Knowledge-based interventions

9. Ensure that evaluation efforts are research-based and lead to industry wide knowledge-sharing.
10. Include in funded projects a requirement for collaboration with expert researchers, which can ensure data collection at the outset and allow assessment of effectiveness, as well as enabling support to be adjusted accordingly.
11. Establish independent programmes of research specifically tasked with assessing the impact of Internet companies on (i) audience trust in news (ii) media viability.

Making internet and other companies part of the solution

12. Regulate to require social media companies to increase transparency reporting and provide greater access to data, in the field of their management of the content ecosystem on their services, as relevant to the profile, availability and labelling of news.
13. Require that companies that are significant intermediaries for news should maintain and make available to the news producers the relevant audience data regarding the reach and engagement of news on their platforms as well as associated advertising metrics.
14. Encourage the companies to increase (at arms-length to protect against editorial interference and pressure) their donations and their transparency in regard to support given to journalism.
15. Pursue anti-trust cases and competition policies that address monopolistic behaviour in advertising markets.
16. Ensure fairness and avoid the marginalisation of local media in any regulation that requires bargaining by internet platforms which carry news content.
17. Engage marketing and advertising companies about the value of placing advertising in news media.

General

18. Earmark special funds for small and medium enterprises to stimulate news start-ups and digital transformation in existing news organizations.
19. Where applicable, raise the percentage of international development support budgets to media development (currently under .03% generally).
20. Join international efforts to raise independent public interest media on policy agendas.
21. Advocate to ensure press freedom which enables a plurality of independent and viable news providers.
22. Speak out about the importance of media viability as a factor for the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Information as a Public Good, as recognised in the Windhoek+30 Declaration.



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the Development
of Communication



with support from
UNESCO Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of
Expression and Safety of Journalists (MDP)

The “Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good” is a call to action to:

- TAKE effective steps to nurture a diversity of viable public, private and community media, and implement specific policies, along with relevant safeguards, to promote the production of independent, quality journalism, with the aim of ensuring people’s access to relevant, diverse and reliable information;
- ENSURE that flows of funding from public sources to the media, including subsidies and advertising, are allocated fairly and overseen in an independent and transparent manner; and guarantee investment in journalism and jobs, while respecting gender equality and promoting decent working conditions;
- ADVOCATE with States and digital platforms, as part of their wider protection of freedom of expression and information as a public good, to recognise media viability as a development priority.

About this brief

This brief comes as part of the [UNESCO series World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development](#). The brief addresses how policymakers can best respond to the severe financial crisis threatening the supply of independent journalism. It provides a typology of global responses, assesses their pros and cons, and makes 22 actionable recommendations. It builds on the Windhoek+30 Declaration, which underlines media viability as a core principle of information as a public good.

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