





# Outside: Exiled News Media and Reporting under Threat, Repression and Reprisals

---

A Zamaneh Media and Newsgain Report  
In cooperation with Radio Tamazuj and Radio Dabanga

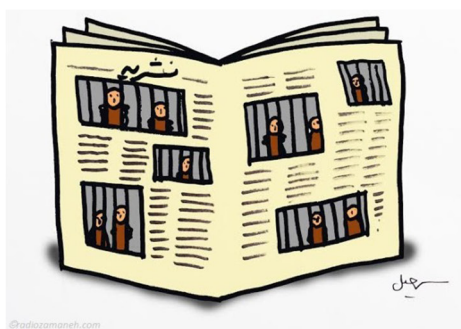
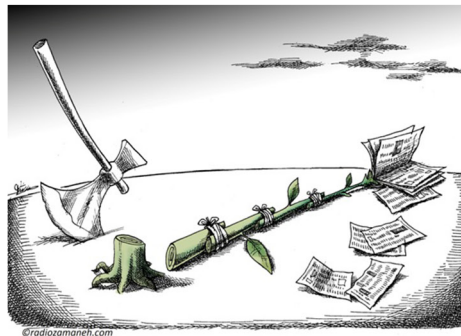
May 2019



NEWSGAIN



***“Exile brings you overnight  
where it would normally take a lifetime to go”  
Joseph Brodsky<sup>i</sup>***





<b>Endnotes</b> .....	34
-----------------------	----

## Foreword by Zamaneh Media

As an independent media organization or journalist in exile, it is easy that to feel you are unique. Unique in the sense that your work is of unprecedented importance, but also that challenges you face are yours alone. The isolation, evident throughout this report, is an important factor in this, combined with a passionate solidarity with and commitment to all your countrymen and women living under severe repression.

Because we are based in the Netherlands, we at Zamaneh Media have the luxury of regular and close contact with various other exiled media organizations for audiences in different countries, especially Radio Dabanga and Radio Tamazuj. Through these encounters, we feel less alone. We found that exiled media organizations like us not only share a similar passion, but also face challenges that often are remarkably similar. Not only editorial challenges, but also financial, organizational and security-related ones. This has urged us to investigate these similarities thoroughly and structurally.

This urge resulted in a two-day expert meeting with representatives of exiled media from all over the world, with the primary aim of sharing both challenges, but also best practices and mitigation tactics. An effort that has been generously supported by the two aforementioned media houses and facilitated by Michelle Foster, all of whom deserve our sincerest gratitude for joining us on this journey. This report details the conclusions of our meeting, supplemented with a wealth of insights from previous work as well as the detailed knowledge of independent media that Newsgain brings to the table.

This report does not appear in a vacuum. A number of conferences, studies and capacity development programs have preceded it. It is, however, unique in that this initiative comes from within the exiled media sector, while previous endeavors have been instigated by donors and the media development sector. We all are extremely thankful for previous work – work that we can also build upon – and at the same time we felt a meeting and report by and for the exiled media itself, detailing our priorities, concerns and recommendations, has obvious merit as an important addition to other work. We therefore hope and trust that it is as useful and informative to others as it is for us.

We thank our partners **Radio Tamazuj**, **Radio Dabanga** and **Newsgain**, and especially all independent exiled media organizations and journalists as well. We thank those that have generously participated in this project, those that have provided valuable input for this report, but also those whom we have not encountered in this process. Your work is paramount in providing access to information to people in some of the most difficult circumstances on the planet. You do so under immense pressure, both professional and personal. But you are not alone.

# Contents

<b>Contents</b>	2
<b>Foreword by Zamaneh Media</b>	3
<b>Overview</b>	4
<b>Why They Leave, Why They Report</b>	7
<b>Case Study: It Was a Risk Worth Taking</b>	8
<b>Managing Exiled Organizations</b>	10
Managing Decentralized News Operations	10
Operating Media Inside Repressive Regimes while Outside the Country	12
Creating and Understanding Audiences	13
Love-Hate: The Relationship with Social Media	14
<b>Security, Surveillance, and Interference</b>	16
Reprisals	16
Repression	16
Maintaining Safe Operations	17
<b>Case Study: Zambian Watchdog</b>	19
<b>The Personal Impact of Exile</b>	21
<b>Sources of Financial Support: Donors, Diaspora, Sponsors and Business Models</b>	23
The Generosity and Uncertainties of Donor Support	23
Making Donor Funding More Effective	24
Business Models	25
<b>Going Home</b>	29
Credits	32
Author's Note	32
About Zamaneh Media	32
About the Author	32
About Newsgain	33

## Overview

---

Exiled news media operate outside. Outside their countries. Outside normal media business models and markets. Outside the typical organizational structures that support professional journalism and often outside the law in their countries of origin. They do so, often at considerable sacrifice, for profoundly humanistic reasons: they flee repression, crisis, conflict, violence, torture, and censure, yet remain deeply tied to those left behind. They care deeply and passionately about journalism and its role in shaping society. They believe in the power of journalism to create discourse and fuel change.

With the highest number of displaced people ever on record<sup>i</sup>, 68.5 million, and with autocratic regimes on the rise, the important role of exiled news media deserves renewed attention. They report on situations inside their home countries that might otherwise be invisible beyond their borders - and even to people living within them. They cover diaspora communities and maintain the connections between people, their families, and their communities that are strained by distance, poverty, and censure.

And they are financially fragile.<sup>ii</sup>

Deutsche Welle Akademie has identified five aspects that contribute to a media organization's overall viability, a concept that extends beyond profitability. It includes dimensions of economic support, empowering political and legal frameworks, strong content, technical expertise, and community attachment and support.<sup>iii</sup> This paper will show how, for exiled media, each of these dimensions is severely disrupted.

This paper also furthers earlier research on exiled media conducted by Will Attfield (2013)<sup>iv</sup>, Clare Elizabeth Cook (2016)<sup>v</sup>, Bill Ristow (2011)<sup>vi</sup>, Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach (2011)<sup>vii</sup>, and Alice Worrall (2019)<sup>viii</sup>.

It shares analysis drawn from a closed-door, roundtable discussion conducted in February 2019 with participants representing nine exiled media organizations. It also includes observations from earlier consultations with other exiled media leaders. In total, it represents findings from more than two dozen exiled organizations reporting on Azerbaijan, Belarus, Burundi, the Caucasus, China, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Iran, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Tibet, Zimbabwe and Zambia. These are some of the world's most repressive press environments: 69% of these countries rank in the lowest quartile of Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index; the remainder are in the lowest half; and five are in the bottom ten.

The organizations represented in this report are not referred to by name but instead have been identified by randomly assigned numbers. The meeting in February 2019 was conducted under Chatham House Rules. Thus, while participants' viewpoints and organizations are quoted and shared, the identity of the speakers and their affiliations remain anonymous.

For the purpose of this report, the following terms are used.



- **Exiled media** refers to exiled media organizations that are independent and actively reporting using professional journalism standards. It does not refer to journalists who have left their countries but have not continued reporting, nor does it refer to journalists who work for state-sponsored news agencies such as VOA, RFA, or BBC.
- **Home country** refers to the country that the media organization came from and that is the primary subject of its reporting.
- **Host country** refers to the country or countries where operations are managed.
- **Secret reporters** refer to those people inside the home country or its diaspora who conduct their reporting undercover and typically report using pseudonyms or without bylines. They may be professional or citizen journalists.

### Three different common types of exiled media were identified.

**Exiled Media: Known Management in Exile, Operating In-Country in Secrecy:** This is perhaps the most common and recognizable form of exiled media. Well-known examples include the former SW Radio Africa, which was headquartered in London and covered Zimbabwe; Meydan TV, covering Azerbaijan while managed in Germany; Uznews.net which operated out of Germany but covered Uzbekistan; and Voice of Tibet, founded in 1996, administered in Norway, and operating from Dharamshala, India.

In-country journalists for these organization operate at significant risk and many have been jailed, tortured, or disappeared. Managers outside the country frequently maintain low profiles and their organizations are sometimes headed, at least in their public-facing activities, by residents of the host country to protect reporters and their families who remain in-country. Local access to their reporting may be blocked or limited and people may be punished for using it.

**Restricted Media: Known Management in Exile, Operating Openly In-Country:** There are also known examples of exile-managed media that have been able to work openly in their countries of exile, yet under restrictive measures. For example, European Radio for Belarus (ERB) is an international radio station based in Warsaw operating legally within Belarus, where it faces an eclectic variety of constraints.<sup>ix</sup>

These media houses also operate in dangerous environments. Reporters can be arrested capriciously, their licenses or accreditations revoked, and their facilities attacked. Radio Daljir, managed in the U.S. and with numerous radio stations in Somalia, is under constant threat of violence from both Al-Shabaab and local officials. Its Director-General, Ahmed Sheikh Mohamed, recently survived an assassination attempt by an armed policeman in Bossaso.<sup>x</sup>

**Returning Exiles:** The most notable example of this includes three media houses that returned to Myanmar after nearly 25 years in exile when the country opened in 2012: DVB (Democratic Voice of Burma), The Irrawaddy, and Mizzima.



## Why They Leave, Why They Report

Exiled media tend to either operate in the global north or across the border of their home country. Although the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) reports that the top countries for hosting refugees are Turkey, Uganda and Pakistan, these are not exclusively where most exiled media operate.<sup>xi</sup> There are two common scenarios.

In the first, countries like the Netherlands, Norway, France, Germany and the United Kingdom host exiled media, and have done so for extended periods. These media often face off against some of the world's most entrenched and repressive regimes and, to varying degrees, benefit from the support of professional journalists, access to training, and technology. Once established, they tend to have legal status and access to social services, can operate abroad without the threat of government sponsored reprisals, and have opportunities for travel and professional support. In some instances, they seek asylum and choose the protections offered by citizenship in their host country.

The second scenario, where exiled media operate across borders or in nearby countries, often results from an immediate crisis or escalating conflict. Exiled media from South Sudan and Somalia have operated out of Kenya. Syrian media have found their way to Turkey and northern Iraq. More than 50 journalists have fled the recent violence against journalists in Nicaragua to Costa Rica.<sup>xii</sup> This creates a different set of operating parameters, as those journalists may become blended into larger refugee populations and may also suffer from the tense relations between their host and home countries.

As one participant summarized, “the North receives exiles, the South creates them.” While clearly a simplification, this comment resonated with other participants.

Why do people leave their home countries? Because they must. Why else would one trade family, friends and careers for instability, possible poverty, and isolation? People flee conflict, war, environmental crisis, enslavement, discrimination, harassment, intimidation and genocide.

Professional journalists, targeted by their governments, leave for these reasons, and in the face of imprisonment, torture, or death. They are criminalized and their reputations attacked. Two of the most common predictors of going into exile are the incidences of murder or imprisonment of journalists: those who have been previously assisted into exile by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) cited fear of violence as their top reason for deciding to leave.<sup>xiii</sup> With 2018 as one of the deadliest years on record for journalists, and with record numbers of journalists imprisoned, there is likely to be yet another surge in journalists seeking sanctuary in exile.<sup>xiv</sup> Moreover, although their situations are similar to those of other refugees, CPJ research has also shown that journalists' high visibility makes them vulnerable to continued persecution, even after going into exile.

Yet despite leaving desperate conditions, nearly all harbor the hope of someday returning home to a better place. This is a significant motivator for journalists to endure the sacrifices of operating media from beyond their familiar borders. In various reports, the common denominators of exiled journalists include a passion for journalism, “a desire to truth-tell, hold decision makers accountable, and disseminate inaccessible material” to create an informed citizenry back in their home countries.<sup>xv</sup>

## Case Study: It Was a Risk Worth Taking

Khin Maung Win: Founding Partner: Democratic Voice of Burma, April 2019

### ***“ Why did I work in exile to provide news to and from Burma? ”***

I left my country in September 1988 and joined a students' organization called All Burma Students Organization (ABSDF). After living in exile, I gained exposure to the free flow of information. While media and information were strictly controlled by the military regime in Burma, the Burmese democracy activists and supporters around the world all relied on Thai media to receive news about the closed country of Burma.

I realized the power of news and information, and learned so much by being open to the world of free information. I started using the internet and email early on. I wanted to use technology to do more to disseminate information about Burma, especially the human rights violations taking place inside the country.

DVB itself was established by the exiled government, the National Coalition Government of Union of Burma (NCGUB), on 19 July 1992 in Oslo. I was picked by it to work for DVB in Oslo when it was founded on 19 July 1992.

I set up DVB branch offices on the Thai-Burma border, the China-Burma border, and in India. I travelled to all those regions and discovered abundant news and information that Burmese people, and supporters of the Burmese democracy movement, deserved to know. That gave me even more energy to discover news from Burma and spread it wider and further.

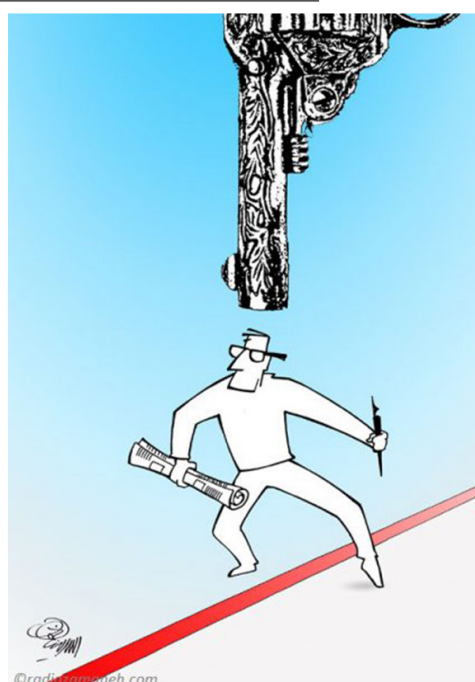
The launch of satellite TV in 2005 demanded a more systematic and functional underground network inside Burma. With a few other colleagues, I successfully set up an underground network inside the country and documented human rights violations. Those were disseminated back to the country and to the international community. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution and 2008 deadly disaster, Cyclone Nargis, Burmese people and international media relied on DVB as a major source of news of Burma. The Oscar-nominated documentary Burma VJ featured reporting from DVB's undercover network during that time.

*I realized the power of “news and information.”*

*"My main motive for working with exiled media is my belief in the power of the free flow of information. This belief has been proven true."*

*"We paid high prices for our beliefs. Many of my VJ colleagues (as many as 17) went to jail during the Saffron Revolution and were only freed in January 2012 after political reform. My parents lived under pressure from the authorities for a decade."*

*"We all now believe it was a risk worth taking."*



## Managing Exiled Organizations

### **Exiled media grapple with issues related to overall management and newsgathering.**

In 2015, the last year for which data was available, CPJ identified 452 journalists who had fled into exile during the preceding 5 years. Of those, only 17% continued working as journalists while in exile. Clearly, not all journalists who flee their countries work in exiled media organizations.

And equally clearly, not all people in those organizations are professional journalists. Many follow a path from activism to journalism and often come from countries where there are few opportunities to be educated as journalists.

## Managing Decentralized News Operations

### **Managing exiled media is complicated.**

They operate decentralized networks of reporters and sources across multiple borders, in different time zones, speaking diverse languages, and having inconsistent skill sets. They communicate using a wide variety of encrypted communication tools and employ coded messages in the direst of circumstances. Sources are confidential and known only to a few.

### **Even so, their stories have impact.**

The round table participants convened by Zamaneh Media showed strong discipline around core newsroom functions, yet they also reported that their exiled condition created unique management challenges. How did those manifest? In many ways.

- A common problem in many newsrooms is staff turnover. Exiled media are no exception. A benefit of being exiled is that reporters outside the country, or able to travel, often have exposure to training from international experts. Yet exiled media generally pay lower salaries than commercial outlets, and good reporters can become targets for recruitment. That turnover is costly since new reporters must be identified and onboarded, and risky since those reporters had inside knowledge of sources and secret reporters.
- Recruiting new hires is typically difficult. The pool of qualified and trusted people may be small and difficult to identify, they may or may not have proper qualifications, may lack residency status and work permits for their host country, and they are often asked to work for low wages without benefits and during irregular hours. Thus, the likeliest choices are often members of the diaspora. The best hires come through deeply trusted connections, as once someone joins the organization, details about its operations and sources become known to them.
- In many news organizations, mid-level managers are the ones who turn plans into actions and ensure that both deadlines and standards are met. Yet in lean exiled organizations, top leaders often also function as hands-on managers, while personally having direct relationships with secret sources in their home countries.

- This lack of middle management leads to issues with organizational sustainability. If top leaders are also working the front lines; if there is no middle management tier being prepared for promotion; if sources are closely held by a few individuals and not identified to others; what happens should the organization's leaders suffer ill health or decide to leave the organization? It is a key vulnerability.
- Operating an exiled media organization also poses unique legal challenges around registration, taxation and structure. The participants reported having registration in different countries from each other for practical reasons. They were also registered as different types of organizations, one as a broadcaster, one as limited liability corporation able to accept commercial revenues, others as non-for-profit organizations. One media organization, with both donor-funded activities and commercial revenues, registered as two separate entities: a non-for-profit that can receive donor funds, and a wholly separate business that returns its profits to support the organization's overall mission. Many observed that having an EU registration was helpful in opening the door to European funding.
- Access to capital is an issue for all news media, particularly those lacking physical assets. Revenues for media companies tend to be cyclical, following election and sport cycles, and are currently at risk due to the secular changes created by the digital transition. It would be extremely unusual for donor-dependent exiled media lacking revenue streams to have access to capital or lines of credit. Thus, those that seek to own a building, expand operations, or invest in transformative technologies must continue to seek donor or philanthropic contribution to do so. In fact, all forms of credit are extremely limited. Partner 14 shared that any credit cards used by his organization are tied to individuals, and their personal credit, rather than to the organization.
- Transitioning from donor-funded operations to those with multiple sources of income also requires focus. Partner 19 shared the cultural challenges mandated by developing more diverse sources of revenue. "When we started selling our ability to do high-quality translations, we had to change our mindset. We had to move from a self-perception of being a funder's sub-contractor to becoming a paid service provider, whose time had a cost and a value."
- Creating technical expertise within their organizations presents an ongoing challenge. Audiences demand content pushed through their preferred channels and, increasingly, that is mobile. "Media comes in many forms and mobile has changed everything," observed Partner 1. "Individuals become 'stations'; reporters can run a 'TV'; a television brand can operate on YouTube. Television is an expired technology." Exiled media, with their lean, often street-smart operations, have worked with all these formats but could clearly benefit from capacity building.



## Operating Media Inside Repressive Regimes While Outside the Country

Not all exiled media are wholly managed outside their home countries. Sometimes it is possible to be in exile, while legally and openly operating a media business inside. There are diverse reasons for doing so, when it is both tolerated and, to an extent, safe.

As noted earlier, a visible example is ERB (European Radio for Belarus), headquartered in Warsaw and legally operating in Belarus. Early on, its management decided that an essential element of success is clearly defining a target audiences and then developing a commercially-competitive offering to attract it. Thus, it targets young adults and has a robust line-up of entertainment content, blended with the news and other content that is reflective of its mission. It has also diversified its sources of revenue to provide a more stable operating base: it currently has commercial, donor, and donation income streams. Its cross-border location allows for independent reporting as well as in-country access to sources.

Other media managers choose exile for different reasons, even when they can legally return to their home countries. For one person, it helps maintain distance from tribal politics and influence. For others, they can generate more money overseas to support operations than at home.

But the power to invest in media that fosters positive social change in one's home country is a powerful motivator. There can be solid benefits to this type of operation, including increased freedom from editorial constraints; access to both in-country and diaspora communities; and direct access to government sources. The resulting journalism can be deeper, and reporters' skills may be more professional due to increased access to professional training and international travel opportunities.

It is not pain free. There are traumas and difficulties for those managing media businesses from outside their home countries. By operating inside their home countries, they are visible in every sense of the word: physically, legally, and politically.

In-country reporters are visible and thus become targets. Offices have been bombed, reporters murdered, and managers targeted for assassination.

Business operations must be legally maintained and, even so, may be subject to unwarranted inspections, shutdowns, and other business interruptions. Advertisers have reported punitive audits from taxing authorities and pressured to withhold ads. Electricity has been shut off, licenses denied, and banking transactions delayed.

Managing from a distance is also challenging, especially when attempting to recruit people on the ground whose skill levels are not up to the job. While in more developed markets, this is not as serious an issue, in conflict zones or areas targeted by terrorists, solid managers and good journalists are rare. "A lack of professional, in-country managers is the price you pay in a society where the highest level of education is high school," stated Partner 1.

*"It is completely possible to invest in media that fosters positive social change while creating a business."*

*Partner #1*

## Creating and Understanding Audiences

Producing any form of high-quality journalism is not easy, and it is not cheap. All of that is more complicated in exile.

Although participants were concerned about funding, reporting was their priority. How, given their operating circumstances, could they consistently create credible, independent content? The challenges to doing so are significant.

Partner #1 stressed that being neutral requires having the resources to do professional reporting, use multiple sources, and conduct fact-checking. Those resources include time, funding and access to sources, all of which are often in scant supply.

Participants also expressed concerns about the length of their time in exile and the aging of their in-country ties. They noted that the longer one is in exile, the more things change: issues, language, slang, neighborhoods, sources, contacts.

*"If you take money from the diaspora, they want you to change the words you use, and ask you to call the country's leader by 'Dictator' So-and-So, rather than 'President.'"*

*Partner #14*

One participant noted that members of the diaspora tend to use old ideas to frame new issues. The risk of this can also apply to journalists long removed from their countries. "How do we stay relevant to the current generation," asked Partner 5, citing the long tenure of many media organizations in exile.

The answer to that question is at the heart of the various audiences claiming their attention. Most exiled media have three key audiences: in-country, diaspora and donor. They must attend to each one of them carefully.

Even while exiled media seek independence and relevance, they are challenged on multiple fronts. How do they respond to the desires of the opposition that expects favorable coverage or a blind eye on its transgressions? How should stories be reported when someone featured for a relatively minor offense might be jailed or receive other disproportionate repercussions? How do they accommodate donor-supplied development programming when audiences tune out after a steady diet of good-for-you content?

A key to balancing these demands lies in the increasing reliance on audience data to help identify, and then communicate, organizational priorities.

Partner 19 has characterized this as the tension between donor-centered versus user-centered media. It differentiates itself as "problem-centered" media, using analytical tools like Google Analytics for fine-tuning its reporting.

*"It takes a lot of resources to be neutral"*

*Partner #11*

Partner 6 demonstrated how maintaining a disciplined focus on its young target audience led it to



develop a highly successful mix of entertainment and local news content.

Partner 11 cited its reliance on audience data for shaping strategy.

Partner 1 observed how monitoring Google Analytics has changed its approach to writing headlines, finding that short clear headlines yield greater audience engagement, as does video content produced with still images and voice-overs, delivering lightweight videos viewable on mobile phones.

The common denominator here, and one that represents a significant change in this group, is its reliance on data and analytics to inform editorial decision making. It makes perfect sense. Operating outside their home countries and with little front-line access to audiences, and with increasing reliance on digital channels for distributing content, analytics give direct feedback on the types of content users access and report critical measures of audience engagement. These metrics avoid the pitfalls of user-reported data in countries where audiences are surveilled, and where even members of the recent diaspora are reluctant to share insights into their use of media.

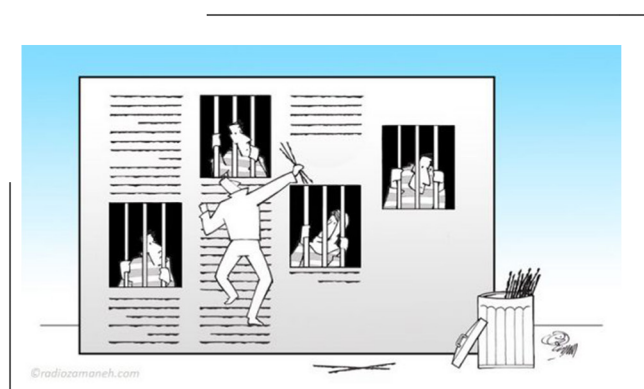
None of the participants, however, professed to be using data tools to their maximum potential. Citing the urgent need for hiring data analysts, they acknowledged that most were not using data to refine understandings of target audiences or fashion content strategies directed to meet the needs of specific segments.

Internally, they were concerned that strong audience insights were not consistently reaching reporters. That said, editors also expressed concern about the potential for reporters to respond in superficial ways to the data, chasing clicks rather than engagement.

The most commonly used tools were Google and YouTube Analytics, both of which are free and supported with robust online training courses, and IO Analytics and Chartbeat, paid services appropriate for larger operations. Facebook Insights was also a resource that was mentioned.

Missing, generally, from this conversation were discussions of ways to diversify content to attract audiences more frequently targeted by advertisers in order to then cross-subsidize reporting. The target audiences sought by donors and reached by exiled media (youth, rural populations, the poor, unempowered women) are not necessarily prime advertiser targets and thus unlikely to attract programmatic advertising.

However, the energy and excitement around the potential of audience data to unlock audiences and become more competitive and trusted news outlets was high.



## Love-Hate: The Relationship with Social Media

By now, the love-hate dynamic between social media and publishers is well-understood. In the exiled media environment, its benefits and pitfalls are amplified.

On the plus side, exile media are strong users of digital communications and social media. They use them to work with sources, track breaking news, identify hot topics, and pick up on commenting. They use Facebook, Instagram and YouTube as distribution channels, and access their analytics to provide audience insights.

*“Social media is the ground  
where we meet our audience.”*

*Partner #14*

Social media is also effective as an equalizer against dictatorial regimes that are unable to contain or control their content, and thus offer effective bypass channels.

When used strategically, exiled media – like others – can direct audiences from promoted content on social media back to their owned websites and apps.

The downsides are also potent.

Facebook and others harvest the lion's share of revenue generated by the content on their pages, returning relatively little to content creators.

Facebook is also neither a regulator nor a cop. It has demonstrated little aptitude for stopping hate speech or preventing legitimate pages from being counterfeited, especially when those occur in languages it does not support. (Witness the rapid spread of hate speech in Burma, which turned into an accelerant for genocide.<sup>xvi</sup>) It offers publishers few controls on limiting commenting that goes out of bounds. Brand damage can occur quickly and be amplified across other social media channels.

And, as noted later in this report, audiences can be turned off. When that happens, it stops referrals to an exiled media's deeper content.

Partner 14 highlighted the unbalanced relationship between the social media giants and exiled media.

“We talk a lot about protecting human rights, about providing vectors for freedom of expression,” he said. “But who protects us? Who ensures the security of our journalists and their work? There should be an organization that advocates for us, that protects our interests in the social media sphere. Social media is the ground where we meet our audience. Yet we have been falsely accused on its platforms and shut off from our readers. We need a higher level of help to resolve these issues.”

## Security, Surveillance, and Interference

---

Exiled media expend significant efforts protecting themselves, their networks, and everyone associated with them. They fight back against reprisals and repression and try to create safety for everyone they touch.

### Reprisals

Repressive governments have a large assortment of tools for punishing those who publish their failings. The list is long.

Owners and reporters risk physical attack and a wide variety of other attacks: financial, legal, personal, professional. Reporters further risk imprisonment and torture.

Stringers, citizen journalists, and secret reporters are even more vulnerable, as they have fewer formal protections.

Advertisers face reprisals in the form of punitive taxation, social exclusion, and business disruption.

Audiences run risks when accessing or sharing their content. Partner 11 shared that a reader was jailed for retweeting its stories. Partner 14 described how secret police actively surveil places where people, driven out of their homes by a lack of electricity, go to internet cafes and other places to share access to listening posts or television.

In this environment, there are many forms of security: digital, data, physical, financial, economic, personal, and legal. While participants noted that donor funds are often available to supply digital security and help offset DDoS attacks, funds are less likely to be provided to ensure the physical safety of journalists or their facilities. Partner 1, in conversation with the author, expressed a frustrated desire for sturdy fencing to protect his in-country radio operations from attack, and for air-conditioning to keep computers cool during the blistering heat of summer.

Partner #3 noted the high costs of overcoming digital surveillance and attacks and the need to have reserve funds available for when they occur.

### Repression

In addition to reactive reprisals, governments and their agents engage in proactive repression. Common tactics include blocking sites (with the consequence of also blocking any ad revenue), jamming short wave radio, actively blocking users' access to diverse media channels, and expanding the use of government propaganda promoting false narratives.

Repressive governments are assisted in these efforts by global giants with sophisticated technical prowess. China was cited as providing other governments with different types of technical interferences, ranging from surveillance tools to orchestrating devastating digital attacks. "We cannot possibly spend enough money to counter the Chinese government's efforts," observed Partner 15. "Facing off against a dedicated state power is a constant battle. We work under the assumption that our social media sites have zero privacy and that our email accounts are visible." He also noted how major tech and data corporations,

lured by the appeal of the world's second-largest economy, are working closely with China and shaping their offerings to its requirements. These have a spillover effect into other countries where China is active.

Participants surfaced an emerging threat, unique to a world where social media now transcend the geographies and media systems that can be closely managed by governments. Two participants described how governments used Facebook and YouTube's complaint processes to close their accounts or blockade them until the complaints are resolved. In one instance, there was a false claim of copyright violation, in another, a complaint about its content when the organization posted stories about human rights atrocities.

Although there are processes to clear those complaints, they take at least six months. In the instance of Partner 11, whose organization received significant revenues from its videos on YouTube, this effectively shut down one of its major revenue sources during the period of adjudication.

As Alphabet (Google's parent company) and Facebook become dominant economic players, participants perceived that corporations are valuing their top-level relationships with governments, even repressive

ones, over press freedom. Cited among many examples was the Google Dragonfly project, in which Google was developing a search engine designed to be compatible with China's state objectives and censor and block large categories of information, such as those dealing with human rights, Tibet, the Uighurs, democracy, protest, and religion.

Although the project is officially halted, and more than a thousand Google employees protested its existence, speculation continues that it might be reprised.<sup>xvii</sup>

Participants also noted fears that both users and citizen journalists hold towards those social media giants. One observed that since its former government increased its surveillance of social media, citizen

journalists who were previously active sharers on YouTube and Facebook either stopped or significantly reduced their postings.

*"How do you fight back when money trumps everything? Google and Facebook want money more than anything else. We are fighting for human rights. They are fighting for market share."*

*Partner #1*

## Maintaining Safe Operations

Preserving the safety of their secret reporters, networks, and sources was a top concern for participants. They noted that an absolutely fundamental requirement for exiled media is protecting its sources and not sharing their identities with anyone outside a strict need-to-know basis. The use of encrypted communications was simply seen as a given.

Partner 19 outlined the lengths that their organization goes to ensure the safety of individuals. A key element is its ban on letting its employees travel back to the home country. Although there might be a strong desire to discreetly visit family and friends in the home country, the risks are too great, both to the individual and to the organization's network of sources.

This partner also noted the significant burden of responsibility an organization's leadership bears for the safety of its people and their contacts. Maintaining a support system for the organization requires identifying and backstopping possible points of failure: lining up legal resources in case of a detention or security breach. Having access to technologists when sites are blocked or come under attack. Providing access to mental health care providers for staffers, all of whom are refugees or in exile, and thus have

suffered considerable trauma.

“The larger your audience,” she observed, “the greater the risk of many different types of attack at both the institutional level, and at the personal level. It’s vital to have a safety net built of organizations, technologists and specialists who can be fast responders when that happens.”

There was general agreement among participants that having one person responsible for maintaining a list of its network of sources and reporters is a significant vulnerability. This was highlighted by the devastating case of Uznews.net. Its founder, veteran Galima Bukharbaeva, had her personal email account hacked in 2014 and the name of her contributors in Uzbekistan revealed, sparking a series of reprisals.

Partner 14’s journalists each maintain separate networks: they do not know each other’s sources. This helps maintain security in one of the world’s most repressive press environments and serves as a backstop when verifying stories using multiple sources, since each reporter turns to different people for confirmation. Although this takes time, it also reduces the risk of having government propaganda or false narratives maliciously inserted into their reporting. “It is better to be late and accurate” he observed, “than fast and wrong.”

The importance of securing sources cannot be overstated. Partner 4, whose work focuses on a country ruled by a conservative religious denomination, has cultivated hundreds of sources who provide insights on highly sensitive topics such as the status of women, pedophilia, LGBT persecution, lifestyles, culture, law and politics. The people who supply these types of news from inside restricted communities or the diaspora may be uniquely vulnerable and face horrific consequences were their identities revealed.

In addition to personal, technical and data security, participants highlighted economic risks. To compensate stringers or in-country reporters, exiled media must have some way to pay them. Obviously, they cannot simply make bank transfers. Thus, “mules” or other couriers carry money across borders and pay in cash. This system is fraught with risk. At one organization, it contributed to an embarrassing and nearly fatal embezzlement scandal. At another, a payroll simply vanished en route to its recipients. For donors, it breaks down the transparency needed to ensure financial accountability.

Safety and security protocols, while essential to protect people and preserve editorial integrity, are not benign. They consume significant resources and focus and are essential components of retaining brand integrity.

## Case Study: **Zambian Watchdog**

A Q&A Interview by Email with Lloyd Himaambo, May 2019

**Q:** How have you been able to operate in/outside the country? Can you share representative examples of the types of interference in your operations, technology and reporting?

**A:** *In 2013 and 2014 our main website was blocked in Zambia and three of our staff arrested but charged with different trumped-up charges which they were acquitted of after three years of incurring legal costs and other costs related to litigation. In 2015, our website was hacked several times leading to loss of readership. Today, just like when we launched operations a decade ago, our reporters work incognito and underground. The editors and key reporters still hibernate outside Zambia. We continue using technology to bypass interference by government and often this entails changing tools such as gadgets, contact numbers and places of stay etc. For those living outside the country, entering Zambia is a rare, risky, undertaking.*

**Q:** Please describe the difficulties of generating ad revenue, especially in Zambia.

**A:** *But it is virtually impossible to generate income in Zambia from these platforms due to the restricted nature of our operations. In the past, Zambian based advertisers who had tried to promote their businesses, projects or events on our forums immediately became targets of government, police intimidation and therefore withdrew from doing business with us. Government operatives, like the secret service have tried to identify our staff and method of operation using advertising offers. Given these difficulties, we have outsourced our advertising function.... The limited revenue from our operations therefore comes solely from outside Zambia.*

**Q:** Can you share the effects of the domain blocking of your site from 2013-2014, and the later DDoS attack around the 2015 election?

**A:** *We have never fully recovered from the blocking and DDoS Attacks. Statistics from Google Analytics and other statistical organisations show that we have not yet reached the amount of traffic that we recorded prior to the attacks.... A lot of people, especially younger people access our content on Facebook page and Twitter. The huge traffic on our Facebook page (now with 683, 000 likes) is ideal .... However, in terms of revenue generation, that does not help us in any way.*

**Q:** Please describe the types of pressures you and your staff and others have received, including personal attacks, interrogations of yourself and/or your staff, and/or family members not formally associated with **Zambian Watchdog**.

**A:** *In the past 12 months, there has been no direct attack on any of our staff or family.... However, in late 2018 and first quarter of 2019, the Supreme Court of Zambia convicted three people of contempt of court. One person was jailed for 6 months but fled the country, the second person was jailed for 18 months and is in prison. The third person was given a suspended sentence. Two of these people were charged with contempt of court after they wrote press statements that were published by the **Zambian Watchdog**. The third person is an editor of a local tabloid, he was jailed for republishing content posted on the **Zambian Watchdog**.... Our view is that the Supreme Court targeted these three people because they were visible but the originator of the articles, **Zambian Watchdog**, was 'invisible'.*

**Q:** Given the above, why have you persisted?

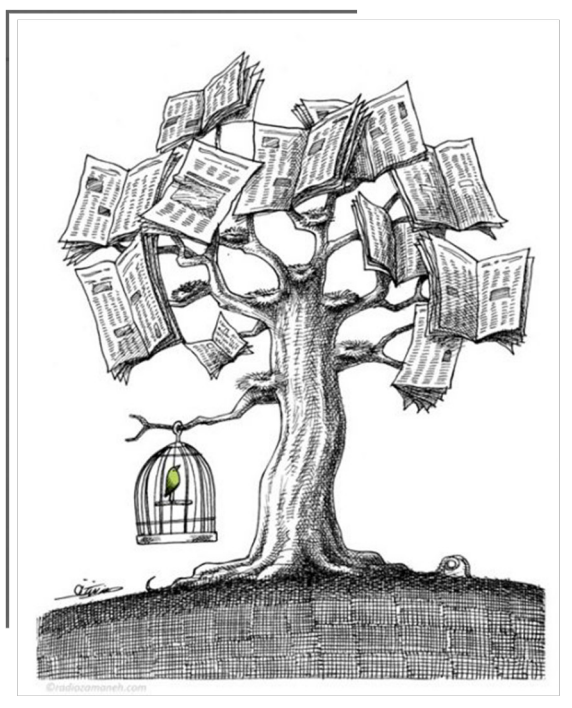
**A:** *Nothing has changed in the Zambian media landscape from the time we established the **Zambian***



*Watchdog. Government continues to control the greater chunks of broadcast media and printed newspapers. The content in the government-controlled media is much more slanted towards government propaganda than ever before. Government has continued interfering in the operations of independent media such as privately-owned TV and radio stations. Licenses of private TV and radio stations are constantly suspended or withdrawn...*

*We have continued to operate the **Zambian Watchdog** because we believe that we offer an alternative, critical and independent voice and perspective to Zambian events.*

*Our work or products may not be perfect or not conform to what some people expect, but we continue to report things, events the way we see them. And a lot of Zambians love what we do.*



#### Links to related articles

- [https://www.panapress.com/-Broadcasting-authority-in-Zambi-a\\_630577235-lang2.html](https://www.panapress.com/-Broadcasting-authority-in-Zambi-a_630577235-lang2.html)
- <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/africa/Zambia-shuts-private-TV-station/4552902-5009148-hg0txl/index.html>
- <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2019/02/27/kafue-community-radio-station-shut-down-by-iba/>
- <https://www.lusakatimes.com/2016/08/22/iba-shuts-muvi-tv-komboni-radio-itezhi-tezhi-radio/>

## The Personal Impact of Exile

The trauma of exile was singled out as a vitally important issue for focus.

While there is considerable relief to journalists in the physical security of escaping constant threat, the psychological burdens are significant. Participants spoke of isolation, of experiencing feelings similar to survivor's guilt: of remorse over having left when others stayed behind and suffered, especially when those included family members targeted with reprisals because of their actions.

Participants also acknowledged the asymmetrical risks to them resulting from their work, and to those remaining in-country. They observed their own relative comfort in comparison to the local reporters in-country who tend to have more physical and financial insecurity and who remain exposed to substantial risks, including imprisonment, fines, torture, and death.

Yet the losses incurred by those in exile are also significant: jobs, marriages, culture, homes, access to their families, financial security, and health. They miss out on the deep rituals of life, the weddings and funerals; celebrations and losses; the comfort of supporting aging parents, the physical presence of family and friends when they die.

They each reported issues of acculturation. In addition to mastering English in order to navigate the international community, they needed to become functionally proficient in the host country's language. Challenges abounded in establishing legal identities, setting up residence, establishing banking accounts, and – when possible – arranging for family members to also relocate.

They continue to be subject to losing valuable parts of their self-identity. People who were previously respected may find themselves having lost financial and social status, while now criminalized and reviled at home. Their values may not be aligned with those of their new host country and they may find it necessary to adjust to issues that weren't social priorities at home, such as gender equality, religious diversity, human rights, or democracy. One poignant example cited was the example of men leaving Sudan and moving to the Netherlands.<sup>xviii</sup>

Exiled journalists are also susceptible to violations of their own privacy. They may have their entire lives scrutinized by their former governments, their movements surveilled, and their communications subject to cyber-attack and manipulation.

Participant's stories of how they arrived in exile were varied. How did they get to this point? No path towards exile was the same. A secret reporter's identity was revealed while out of the country, her family threatened, her office raided, and she could not safely return home. A gay person came out while traveling abroad, and the home country's government denied him return access. A journalist took a perilous ocean voyage to escape. A respected state broadcaster on an international reporting trip walked out and sought asylum.

How well do they fit into their new locations? Participants shared diverse viewpoints on the need and desirability of assimilating into the host country.



Partner 17 spoke of exiled journalists who had become paralyzed by the hope of returning, unable to fully assimilate because they were positioned looking backward, not forward. Partner 14 shared his absolute intention to never assimilate saying it would only dilute his closeness to his sources and target audience. Others spoke of the Balkanization of exiled communities within their host countries, such as Eastleigh, the “Little Mogadishu” of Nairobi. The presence of children in the exiled families appears to encourage some level of assimilation as they grow up in the local language, attend schools, and make friends.

Journalists’ challenges of assimilation (or not) were further complicated by the decision to operate a news organization from abroad. In their home countries, journalists mostly learned their craft in legacy media. Becoming exiled forced them onto digital, short wave, and/or satellite platforms, with a steep learning curve as they further transitioned to mastering digital/mobile platforms as audience use shifted.

Yet prolonged exile also reshapes how one views one’s home country. Partner #5 noted that the longer journalists remained isolated and in exile, reporting on the inequities at home but unable to participate in its daily life, the greater the likelihood that ideas about their home country would darken and harden.

And this is all before they tried to fund their operations.

*“I love my job and never thought about making money or about the impact it could have on my health or the health of my colleagues. It was my huge mistake... It is part of the price that we are paying for what we are doing under enormous stress.”*

*Partner #16*



## Sources of Financial Support: Donors, Diaspora, Sponsors and Business Models

Exiled media have abundant anxieties about funding, especially smaller organizations reliant on only one or two primary donors. Financial worries at an organizational level are taken by osmosis to the personal level, through the porous boundaries between exiled journalists and their organizations. The fragility of a news organization's finances translates directly into financial vulnerability for its workers.

### The Generosity and Uncertainties of Donor Support

Clare Elizabeth Cook's report on the economics of exiled media highlights their ongoing struggle when searching for sources of long-term funding.<sup>xix</sup> Yet, considering what funders hope to achieve, it is not surprising that exiled news organizations have trouble finding support. Funder priorities are rarely perfectly aligned with the objectives of exiled media.

In CIMA's 2017 report on donor priorities in media development, funding exiled media was not only excluded from the list of high priorities, it didn't even show up on the list of low priorities.<sup>xx</sup> That is not to say that funding an individual media organization facing an unusual situation is considered unimportant; however, it does suggest that funding exiled media in general, as an end in itself and not a subset of a larger objective (such as freedom of information), is not a significant donor objective.

That is reflective of what the meeting's participants observed. They noted that funders now prefer to invest in specific outcomes rather than provide general, ongoing support. As a result, nearly all of them now manage relationships with a wide variety of donors and sponsors. Indeed, the more mature exiled media tend to manage long and short-term projects under funding from multiple organizations, with an overall changing mix of players.

The most successful operations also generate income from many sources. They organize events in their host countries and generate revenue through online courses and in-person training, when possible, from a safety and security standpoint. They offer translation services and produce custom content. They actively solicit audience donations. Consulting services generate new revenue.

Sponsors, often NGOs with development-oriented content, will also pay to move distribution through an organization's various media channels. Those with strong brands and credible reputations offer powerful platforms for reaching targeted audiences among marginalized or isolated audiences, and those affected by conflict.

An expert on this subject, Partner 6 offered this crisp summary: *"Exiled media organizations with professional standards and multiple donors tend to survive."*

Those that are reliant on only one or two major funders are conversely at risk, as most have been advised that they are on short runways and must achieve some level of financial lift-off and self-reliance soon. It is both a truism and true that donor funding always ends. Many donors are reluctant to permanently embed

the costs of operating a media organization into their own cost structure. Doing so can limit their own organization's ability to respond to changing threats and needs around the world. It can also put some donors at risk, over time, for being out of sync with the priorities of government-issued grants, such as those from USAID, DFID and SIDA.

For the downstream organizations that have been journalist-led and newsroom-only, losing a major donor and transitioning to self-reliance presents formidable challenges.

It requires, more than anything else, a changed mindset. Exiled journalists tend not to be motivated by money, but rather by purpose, passion, and the desire to hold power accountable.

That is self-evident in their choice to work as exiled journalists. No one who is primarily motivated by money thinks the fastest path to a personal fortune is operating an exiled media organization.

And those qualities, while admirable, do not automatically make them great business managers. Efforts to transform journalists into entrepreneurial, market-oriented managers have had limited success. They often have a palpable lack of interest in business management.

Whether resulting from external pressures, the changing shape of news media, internal management, or a combination of all of these, there has been a high attrition rate among exiled media. Since Bill Ristow's report on exiled media was published in 2011, four of the twelve organizations he featured are apparently out of business, five are still active, and one has continued online after ceasing its print publication. Two have returned home and continue operations there.

## Making Donor Funding More Effective

Participants suggested ways in which donor support could be made more effective. The lack of core funding and the inability to keep emergency reserves were constant concerns.

Core funding was presented as a fundamental building block of success, but one that has been crumbling. Core funding keeps the lights on and the machinery moving between projects and funding rounds.

Participants discussed its essential role in creating competitive, innovative organizations, able to respond quickly to the changing needs of their audiences and to the overall changing media environment. Budgets completely allocated on a line-item basis, and linked to specific outcomes, were viewed as limiting the ability to identify and deliver new solutions. That approach can also preclude investments in small scale projects that might test new approaches.

Also desirable was an increased tolerance for failure. Innovation is often a by-product of failed experimentation. Business schools point to Post-it Notes and Viagra as successes born from experiments intended to produce other results. Management books offer case examples of how the lack of an innovation culture often precedes organizational demise. Yet donors, legitimately cautious with taxpayer and donated funds, were represented as having limited tolerance for investments that cannot yield short-term results.

Participants also expressed the practical need for having reserve funds on hands. Payments get delayed, currencies fluctuate, emergencies arise. With most funds dedicated to specific actions, media houses find themselves cash-strapped to address these types of situations while keeping the lights on between major initiatives. Partner 3 observed, "we have important activities that we must do in order to be sustainable: data analysis, revenue development, and others. But there is a disconnect between tight donor funding realities and investing in these areas. Notably, it is difficult to get a percentage allocated to a reserve within

core funding allocations.” In response, this organization uses self-generated revenue to create its own reserves, a solution not universally available to other exiled media.

Also noted were the increased organizational complexities of dealing with multiple stakeholders. “There are many influencers in media organizations,” observed Partner 6. “Boards of directors, advisory panels, labor relation boards, NGOs, funders. To make it work, we have to bring them all together and get to some level of consensus.” That process of consensus-building is important and addresses the expanded downstream reporting requirements that emerge in parallel with the increased partnerships and programs.

Although there was clearly gratitude towards donors for their support, some journalists felt that the relationship could be on a more equal footing. One participant commented that a patronizing approach is sometimes adopted towards exiled media and speculated that it might be reflective of a larger set of prejudices between donors of the Global North and those in the South they assist.

That sentiment carried over to discussions of compensation. Exiled journalists (in this meeting and in earlier sessions) felt they approach their work as serious professionals being paid to accomplish important human rights goals. Those goals, in turn, fit into the overall diplomatic, humanitarian, and geopolitical goals of their ultimate funders. Yet they also felt that donors too often treat their work as some form of paid volunteerism, bordering on public assistance. Low pay levels are especially demoralizing in comparison to what other journalists earn locally and that seemed to them to reflect a viewpoint on their competence and worth.

## Business Models

Exiled news media are difficult to finance since they are philosophy-based, not market-based. The likelihood of exiled news media generating enough market-based revenue to support their total operations is extremely slim, and only possible among those that cover markets that have large enough populations that make them relevant to the global and regional ad networks where ad placement is generally agnostic.

In places like Eritrea, Sudan, and other extremely closed societies, or those, like Syria and Yemen, that are in active conflict, there is no opportunity for market-derived revenue. Any voice that is perceived as oppositional or critical of the government is viewed as attacking the regime. Under those circumstances, local businesses would be suicidal to advertise with exiled media. Global advertisers are not the remedy either. They shun places that lack consumer markets, are actively at war, or that do not offer brand-safe advertising environments.

Subscription and donation revenues are also unlikely to hold promise. In these worst-case environments, citizens are heavily surveilled, deeply poor, and lack access to internet. Payment gateways, an essential element of subscription models, are absent – and even if they weren’t, the risks to individuals if the government learned they were subscribing to a perceived traitorous media source could be dire.

Diasporas from these countries may be news consumers via social media and websites. But they too are unlikely to become paying subscribers. Often living in poverty, themselves, they often remit payments to support remaining family members.

*“It is difficult to monetize the desire to change the government’s structure”*

*Partner #1*

There are various forms of consumer-generated revenue that are currently being adopted in mainstream media markets that appear to have limited relevance currently to exiled media, these are unlikely to become dominant sources of their long-term funding: membership programs and crowdfunding.

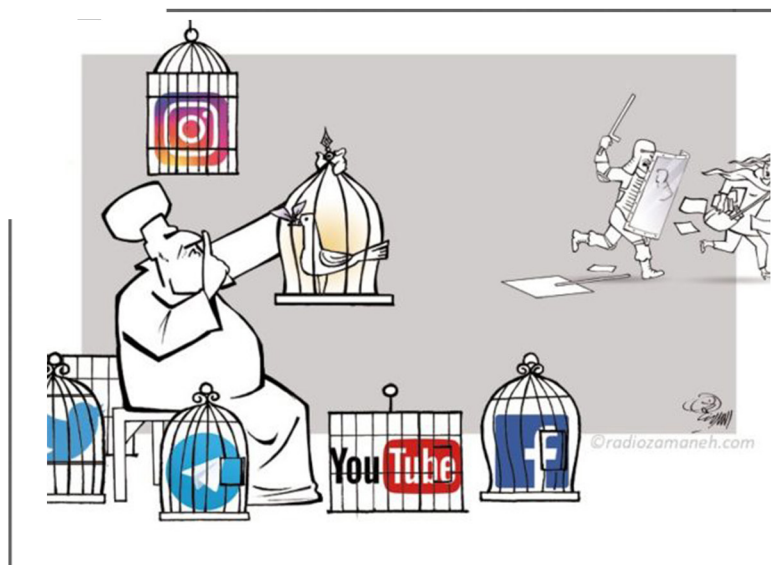
Membership programs are built on well-managed lists. They require strong data skills, an underlying customer relationship management system, creativity in developing and testing appeals, and the use of data science to optimize performance and identify potential target groups. Remarketing and renewal management are essential to success. At present, few exiled media groups have the expertise to implement such programs. Moreover, as noted elsewhere, people who may be loyal to exiled media may still be reluctant to participate.

Crowdfunding is also unlikely to be a long-term source of funding. In her recent report on startup journalism organizations in the Global South, Anya Shiffrin concluded, “we don’t believe that crowdfunding can provide core support or sustained support over the long run in countries with annual per capita GDP of below \$15,000... We continue to view crowdfunding as a nice add-on in countries that are middle income or richer – a kind of icing on the cake.”<sup>xxi</sup> Given the low incomes in many freedom-restricted countries and citizens’ lack of access to banking, this model seems equally unlikely to be applicable to exiled media.

Yet it is possible for some exiled media houses to generate commercial revenue to provide some level of financial security. Participants identified some requirements for developing commercial revenue on their own websites and other platforms.

- **Secure payment gateways:** In low-income and unbanked countries, many people lack access to credit cards. Mobile payment systems, such as Kenya’s ubiquitous M-Pesa, address this issue. However, they are not universally available and may not work across borders. Those issues are secondary to user concerns about privacy. In discussions with one exiled media house about potentially establishing membership clubs, management pushed back citing user fears that their affiliation with the organization could be revealed by government hackers or data leaks. For exiled media to gain any form of consumer-generated revenue, they will have to provide deep assurances about consumer safety. That said, Partner 6 referenced a Russian partner who successfully established a donation button on its site, so these objections may have been overcome elsewhere.
- **Robust digital technology and sophisticated online presentation:** Online media compete with every other platform. Participants noted the increased access to mobile content and use of social media as threats to their viewership. Having a site that resists attacks is a fundamental requirement; having one that engages users is critical.

- **Searchable languages:** Local languages that aren't searchable or well-presented online limit audience growth. Having some level of English or other major language content on a website can help increase audience numbers. Being able to geo-target based on language is a huge advantage.
- **Mobile distribution:** Having a responsive website (where content scales to automatically fit the screen) is a minimum requirement for presenting content on mobile devices. Better yet is having a branded app optimized for mobile devices. Google's search algorithm has for years down-scored sites that still require people to manually pinch and widen content to fit their screens.
- **Management bandwidth:** It takes some level of operational bandwidth (time, money, management and expertise) to experiment with expanded revenue streams and diversified offerings. Many exiled media houses lack the first three and have expertise only in their core areas.





## Case Study: Thoughts for Donors

---

### Partner 16

After years of working in exile operating a broad network of secret reporters and generating diverse sources of income, this partner recommended specific recommendations concerning the way donor funding is managed. These recommendations received warm support, in various degrees, from other participants.

- **Donors should offer more generous and longer-term (3-5 years) core funding,** especially to established and successful outlets. Dictatorships have enormously increased their investments in global media influence. This is a reality that nobody should ignore. Providing an alternative voice is expensive and current budgets are insufficient to have impact that we could achieve. We currently have measurable impact: our content reaches at least a tenth of the entire population each week. Both the government and fellow citizens solve the social and economic problems we identify. We can increase that powerful impact, but not at the current funding levels for independent media.
- **Increase the flexibility with which exiled media can use their funds.** Media outlets that have earned the trust of donors should have discretion in how they allocate funds. Tight budgetary frameworks hurt experimentation and innovation. Our work is in constant flux and we need budgeting tools that allow us to be agile and edgy. Funding should be results-oriented and not micro-managed.
- **Reduce reporting requirements.** While understanding and supporting the importance of reporting, the current requirements are onerous. Reporting should be annual and simplified. Doing reports three or four times for every donor takes considerable time and dilutes focus on content and development.
- **Pay professional level salaries.** We started building our media as volunteer, then worked for 5 years with a low salary. Our journalists get even less. Yet we expect them to perform at the highest professional standards. This is not how it should be. Low salaries create personal anxieties and are not in balance with the overall importance of the role that exiled media play in their home countries and in the broader environment.
- **Provide adequate provisions for the health and well-being of exiled media workers.** As a group, these people have unique needs. We operate under enormous stress. When people are sick, or responding to the traumas of life in exile, we need to get them the care they need.

## Going Home

While the people quoted in this report are all still in exile, they aspire to someday repatriate. Many leave in the midst of a crisis, believing that the world will intervene, justice be restored, and they will be home again soon.

Yet in the CPJ study reviewing five years of journalists in exile, a small, sad statistic sticks out: only 4% returned home.<sup>xxii</sup>

Repatriation tends to take a long time. The founding dates of the media organizations represented in this report illustrate that point: 1992, 1996, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2009, 2013. At one exiled media house, many of its journalists are now second-generation exiles who have never set foot in their “home” country.

Going home is not inevitable, nor is it likely to be swift.

And yet, occasionally, it does happen, as in the aftermath of Myanmar opening its borders in 2012. Exiled media organizations moved back into the country after decades spent outside. For the most part, they were welcomed, and their brands wore significant halos. Under the junta, people relied on them as sources of outside information, as lights in the darkness.<sup>xxiii</sup> They returned home hailed as deeply trusted partners in the movement towards freedom.

Yet the changes that prompted their return also signaled the opening of the larger media sector inside the country. Independent news organizations, which had struggled yet managed to continue operating under the military regime, also had new freedoms.

And the crony news media with close ties to the junta held enviable positions once the market opened and experienced exponential growth.

Competition exploded. Myanmar, once a dead market for advertising and with heavily censored news, catapulted into high-growth. It was a Wild West media market with vibrant growth followed by a high fatality rate in the inevitable shoot-out for audiences and advertisers.

In this complex environment, the returnees and their organizations faced unique challenges.

Some were personal: many had married out of the country and raised families. Their children attended good schools and had access to high quality health care. Should they be moved to a country they had never seen and attend schools in a fractured education system? Would non-native Burmese spouses, with established careers, wish to relocate? Would the pendulum swing, bringing the journalists’ own lives back into jeopardy?

*“The problem with dictatorships is that no one is able to predict when they will fall.”*

*Partner #6*



Some issues were legacies of their exile heritage. How do you manage those former secret reporters who operated at great personal risk, many of whom endured substantial periods of imprisonment and torture? How, if at all, should they be compensated? Do they now become employees? And if so, are their skill levels on par with what's required?

Legal issues weighed down their paths forward. Uncertainties existed about what types of operating licenses would be issued and how they would be allocated. Converting from a donor-funded not-for-profit organization to one with blended commercial and donor income was also complicated, as were the challenges around legal ownership and registration. If an exiled media house goes commercial, do the founders then become owners? That discussion and its conclusions then trigger issues around share issuance, the company's valuation, and its oversight.

There were more normal business issues, as well. The first and most immediate was to professionalize management structures and become more competitive. Audiences, eager for outside news under the junta, earlier tolerated production values and reporting formats that now began to look amateurish in a new era of easy access to global media.

The organizations' brands also needed to adjust. During their years in exile, they were clearly activist and opposition media, revealing news the junta wanted concealed. The shift in government, and increased access to that government, mandated a parallel shift in editorial focus to encompass broader viewpoints. This change of voice alienated some loyal audiences but was an essential step in growing their overall audience levels locally.

As in other areas of life, timing is everything. Audience expectations increased just as donors began to question the appropriateness of continuing to fund the former exiles and sought to reduce or eliminate their support.

After all, the journalists had returned home, the market was now open, and their brands had ready-built audiences. What would be the justification for continuing to financially support media operating in direct competition with local content producers who had also been under the government's thumb and yet had survived without external support? Would that not distort the market?

Over time, that issue was largely sorted out as the awareness of the government's capture of local media and ad revenues was understood more clearly, and as the inevitable backlash hit the media sector. New donors and investors emerged; many of the old ones stayed on board.

Yet the demand to become more competitive from advertisers and audiences was real and persistent. Throw into that already volatile mix the country's rapid expansion of mobile phones, virgin access to digital platforms, and the impact of social media, and the complexities facing the media environment became exponentially more complicated.

While exiled media operate under challenging circumstances, they tend to operate with less complicated business models. They recognize two "customers," their audiences and their donors. When returning home, they quickly need to add a third, their commercial customers, usually advertisers and commercial sponsors. The best way to do so is to have on board experienced sales and business development leadership.

However, as noted in recent studies, many exiled and startup organizations are headed by journalists who continue to oversee revenue and audience development efforts, areas in which they are not skilled.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The things that made them successful as exiled journalists may not make them successful entrepreneurs.

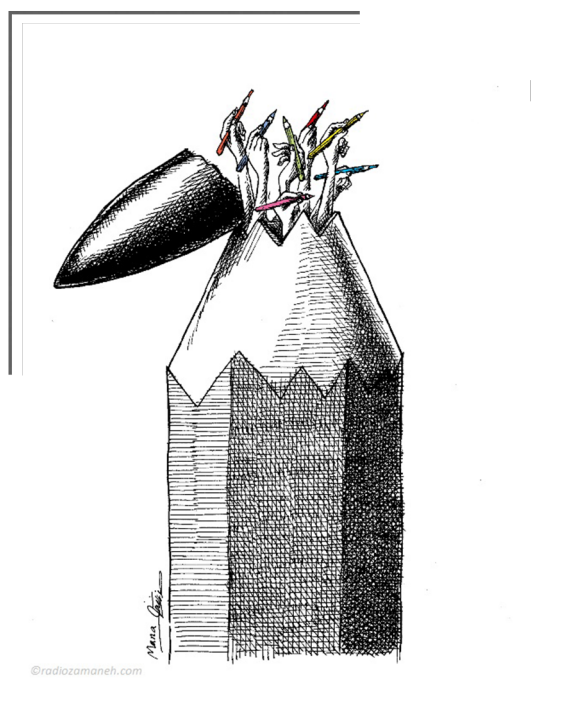
As observed by Premesh Chandran, one of the founders of Malaysiakini, “great journalists may not be great in business, just as doctors may fail at running a hospital or a great football player may not be a good manager.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

The transition from Chief Editor to Chief Executive Officer is not a natural one for most professional journalists who, rightly, keep distance between their newsrooms and their business operations. This was no different in Myanmar.

“Most exiled media operators are resourceful survivors and take a jack-of-all-trades approach out of necessity,” observed Myanmar business consultant and sales executive Chris Hajecki.<sup>xxxvi</sup> For editors and top journalists used to having autonomy over their operations, onboarding professional managers proved difficult. They were hard to find – every business in the country was looking for qualified people and once they were on board, it was tough to transform from a newsroom into a corporation.

Now seven years down the road, the news organizations that returned to Myanmar are still competing and evolving.

Perhaps the lesson learned is that going home for exiled media is not the end. Rather, it is yet another difficult transition, albeit welcomed, requiring even more heavy lifting from people who have already borne a lot.



## Credits

---

### Author's Note

The author wishes to thank everyone who shared their thoughts and experiences to inform this report, and Zamaneh Media, Radio Tamazuj and Radio Dabanga that made it possible.

She is particularly grateful to Lloyd Himaambo and Khin Maung Win who were willing to share their experiences on the record.

### About Zamaneh Media

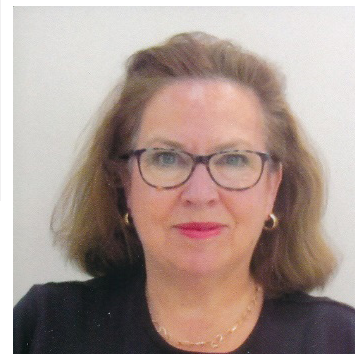
Zamaneh Media is a Persian language, independent multi-media organization based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It provides independent journalism, citizen reporting, research & analysis, education, and debate to an audience in Iran and the Persian speaking communities around the world.

It is a public media that gives a voice to the unheard: geographic, ethnic and sexual minorities, young Iranians, experts, writers, bloggers and independent academic thinkers who are all engaged in conversations about a wide range of issues that are considered public taboos in present-day Iran.

The editorial output of its Persian news platform, Radio Zamaneh, focuses on news reports, analyses, commentaries, debates and films about social, economic, cultural and political topics, press and internet freedom, human rights and democracy. At the same time, it hosts several participatory journalism and civil society centered projects including Zamaneh Tribune, a secure online user-generated content platform where Iranian citizen reporters and human rights activists can freely upload, share and discuss a wide variety of multimedia reports.

Zamaneh Media provided well over 4000 Iranians with online education in Persian on independent journalism, multimedia reporting and digital security. Its different web platforms yielded over 30 million visits last year.





## About the Author

Michelle J. Foster is a media management and marketing consultant who helps news media companies improve business performance. Foster is a founding partner of Newsgain and a founding member of IMDA, the International Media Development Advisers group. She has worked with organizations throughout the United States and in China, Myanmar, SE Asia, the Balkans, Eastern Europe and Africa. She has been a Knight International Journalism Fellow in SE Asia on two occasions and serves on the board of the Independent Journalism Foundation.

From 1991 until 2003, Foster was the senior market development executive for Gannett Co., Inc.'s Newspaper Division. As such, she oversaw marketing efforts for 97 daily newspapers, a host of national brands, and niche/vertical product lines. She led efforts in branding, segment development, consumer and business marketing, database development, market intelligence, and the migration of brands from traditional to online media. In that role, she won repeated recognition for excellence in innovation and marketing leadership.

**NEWSGAIN**

## About Newsgain

Newsgain is a social purpose company that empowers reputable media in restricted environments to thrive both as news media and as well-managed organisations. Its network of consulting partners provides knowledgeable, reality-tested guidance to media, helping them address and overcome numerous constraints and become deeply relevant to – and preferred by – audiences. In partnership with others seeking to create vibrant, independent news media environments, Newsgain provides consulting services directly to media organisations and journalists. It contributes expert knowledge to the media development community.

## Endnotes

---

- i . Joseph Brodsky was a Russian and American poet and essayist born in Leningrad in 1940. He ran afoul of Soviet authorities and was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972, settling in exile in the United States.
- ii . UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Figures at a Glance*, June 19, 2018, accessed at <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>
- iii . Cook, Clare Elizabeth, *Fragile Finance: The Revenue Models of Oppositional News Outlets in Repressive Regimes*; University of Central Lancashire, as appeared in *The International Communication Gazette*, 78 (6). pp. 514-535. ISSN 1748-0485, 2016, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1748048516640212>
- iv . Shiffrin, Anya, *Fighting for Survival: Media Startups in the Global South*, Anya Shiffrin, Columbia University SIPA, published by CIMA, January 2019, p.18, quoting research from DW Akademie and Peter Deselaers, Kyle James, Roula Mikhael, and Laura Schneider, accessed at <https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/fighting-for-survival/>
- v . Attfield, Will, *Independent Media in Exile: a Baseline Consultation*; Intermedia Research and Consulting Europe (IRCE) and Fojo Media Institute, June 2013, [https://www.intermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Fojo\\_Exile\\_Media\\_FINAL\\_PUBLISHED\\_REPORT\\_19-06-13.pdf](https://www.intermedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Fojo_Exile_Media_FINAL_PUBLISHED_REPORT_19-06-13.pdf)
- vi . Ibid., Cook
- vii . Ristow, Bill, *Independent Media in Exile*; Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), June 2011, [https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Exile\\_Media\\_06-15-11.pdf](https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Exile_Media_06-15-11.pdf)
- viii . Sadouskaya, Maryia, *The New Face of Exiled Media*; Columbia University, 2011
- ix . Worrall, Alice, *The Situation of Exiled Media*; Free Press Unlimited and the University of Maastricht, 2019
- x . Ibid., Sadouskaya,
- xi . NUSOJ: *Radio Journalist Survives Shooting Attack, NUSOJ Demands Protection of Journalists' Safety*, Radio Daljir, December 12, 2018, accessed at <https://www.daljir.com/nusoj-radio-journalist-survives-shooting-attack-nusoj-demands-protection-of-journalists-safety/>
- xii . Ibid., UNHCR
- xiii . Southwick, Natalie, *Nicaragua's Journalists are under Government Attack*, The Miami Herald, May 7, 2019, accessed at <https://www.miamiherald.com/opinion/op-ed/article230150489.html>
- xiv . CPJ, *Journalists in Exile 2013*, June 19, 2013, accessed at <https://cpj.org/reports/2013/06/journalists-in-exile-2013.php>

- xv . Beiser, Elena, *More Journalists Killed on the Job as Reprisal Murders Nearly Double*, Committee to Protect Journalists, December 19, 2018, accessed at <https://cpj.org/reports/2018/12/journalists-killed-murdered-afghan-saudi-us.php> "At least 53 journalists were killed around the world between January 1 and December 14, 2018, of which at least 34 were singled out for murder...The recent uptick in killings follows two years of decline, but comes as the jailing of journalists hit a sustained high – adding up to a profound global crisis of press freedom."
- xvi . Ibid., Cook, p.1
- xvii . CPJ, *452 Journalists Forced into Exile Since 2010*, accessed at <https://cpj.org/exile/>
- xviii . Mozur, Paul, *A Genocide Incited on Facebook, with Posts from Myanmar's Military*, New York Times, October 15, 2018, accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>
- xix . Liao, Shannon, *Google Employees Aren't Convinced that Dragonfly is Dead*, The Verve, March 4, 2019, accessed at <https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/4/18250285/google-dragonfly-censored-search-engine-code-dead-employees-doubt>
- xx . Worrall, Alice, *The Situation of Exiled Media*; Free Press Unlimited and the University of Maastricht, 2019
- xxi . Ibid., Cook
- xxii . Kalathil, Shanthi, *A Slowly Shifting Field: Understanding Donor Priorities in Media Development*, Center for International Media Assistance, April 25, 2107, accessed at <https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/slowly-shifting-field/>
- xxiii . Ibid., Shiffrin, p.12
- xxiv . Ibid., CPJ, *452 Journalists Forced into Exile Since 2010*
- xxv . Foster, Michelle, *Focus group results with Myanmar audiences*, 2013
- xxvi . Warner, Janine and Iastrebnier, Mijal, *Inflection Point: Impact, Threats, and Sustainability, a Study of Latin American Digital Media Entrepreneurs*, Sembra Media, 2017, p.40, accessed at <http://data.sembramedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Inflection-Point-SembraMedia-eng-7-20.pdf>
- xxvii . Chandran, Premesh, as quoted in *Fighting for Survival: Media Startups in the Global South*, Anya Shiffrin, Columbia University SIPA, published by CIMA, January 2019, p.16, accessed at <https://www.cima.ned.org/resource/fighting-for-survival/>
- xxviii . Hajecki, Chris, interview with the author, April 24, 2019 by email