

# FLIGHT AND FIGHT

Supporting Exiled Media to *Survive* and *Sustain*

STOP THE  
ATTACKS  
ON PRESS FREEDOM  
& FREE EXPRESSION!

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*"Are we safe? No.*

*Are we safer?*

*Yes, because of the accumulated  
defences that we are building around us."*

(Interviewee AA)

*"You do this for your country, the society, through  
independent, factual, truthful reporting.*

*But then who is going to pay for it?"*

(Interviewee D)



# Executive Summary

## Background

Exiled media outlets<sup>1</sup> provide crucial independent news and information to audiences in repressive environments that might otherwise lack this access. This report fills a research gap around their experiences and needs, and proposes actionable recommendations to support this growing group.

While there is no precise count of the numbers of journalists forced to flee in recent years, media assistance organisations are providing unprecedented levels of support (Reporters without Borders 2023a, Westcott 2023). Some of these journalists continue reporting for and about their home (original) country, joining the growing number of exiled media outlets.

This community is fragmented, linguistically diverse, geographically dispersed and operating largely under the radar. Consequently it is more challenging to understand their needs and ensure they receive appropriate support to continue serving their audiences, particularly as their situations constantly evolve.

## Research Overview and Method

This research asked:

*How can the media development community support exiled media outlets to survive and continue their work?*

The research underpinning this report took place from October 2023 to April 2024. Following a literature review, qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives from 25 exiled media outlets that serve communities in diverse situations, including those that are largely neglected by a global spotlight which has tended to focus – albeit with less intensity than is needed – on crises in Afghanistan and Ukraine, and crackdowns on press freedom in Russia. Participating media outlets reach audiences in Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba, Syria, Libya, Iran, Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Myanmar, Hong Kong, China, Turkmenistan, Russia and Azerbaijan.

Findings from these interviews were triangulated with participant observations at international conferences and virtual webinars, and then validated at a session with seven key informants who work with exiled media outlets.



# Key Findings

The interviews highlight that challenges for exiled media outlets manifest at two levels, structural and organisational. The former are largely beyond the power of the media outlets to resolve but have a significant impact on outlets' operations. In contrast, outlets are determined and creative in their efforts to overcome challenges they face at the organisational level.

## Structural-Level Challenges

**Registration of media outlets:** Journalists must give careful consideration to the appropriate form of registration for their outlet in their new (host) country, which requires navigating complex and unfamiliar legal and regulatory terrain. They may not speak the host country language or have access to legal advice on legal and regulatory issues in both their host and home countries. Another challenge here is the lack of a suitable organisational status that reflects the public interest, income-generation and third party funding requirements of independent media outlets (which are, strictly speaking, neither nonprofits nor commercial organisations).

**International banking system:** Banking regulations make it difficult for exiled media outlets to open a bank account in their host country, and challenging to send and receive money to and from their home country, including paying contributors and receiving subscription income. This is particularly problematic if the outlet comes from a country that faces international sanctions.

**Social media dynamics:** Exiled media outlets may rely on social media to evade censorship by their home country's regime, distribute their content, work with sources, gather stories and gain audience insights. Yet social media platforms also enable harassment, surveillance and extensive mis- and disinformation from state or non-state actors. These platforms' content moderation systems may be weaponised to suppress or remove credible content, or block or ban exiled media outlets, leading to outlets losing both audience and revenue. Exiled media outlets may be required to provide highly sensitive personal contact information to be verified by these platforms in the first place, potentially risking the safety of their personnel.

## Outlet-Level Challenges

**Operational issues:** As a group, exiled media operate decentralised networks of reporters and sources across multiple borders, in varied time zones, and diverse legal, regulatory and risk environments. Staff recruitment is tough: the situation for independent media in their home country may have limited the cadre of professional journalists from which they can recruit, particularly where regime-aligned media offer greater financial and personal security. Exiled media outlets' teams tend to be lean, with key expertise missing and extensive multi-tasking



across administrative, journalistic and fundraising functions typical.

**Editorial issues:** There are significant challenges to exiled media outlets producing independent, credible content. Reporting is more time-consuming and expensive from exile, verifying information takes much longer from a distance. In-country sources are key but take extreme risks and must be protected by rigorously applied security protocols and real-time understanding of the shifting legal environment. Communications can also be affected by internet shutdowns and other efforts to limit the flow of independent and accurate information. Audience trust is fundamental, but is hard to build when outlets cannot operate openly, and is easily undermined through deliberate attempts to discredit, ban or even impersonate the exiled media brand.

**Knowing the audience and demonstrating reach and impact:** Depending on conditions in the home country, audiences may take significant risks to access independent information and may use virtual private networks (VPNs) to disguise their activities. This limits the availability of data that exiled media outlets can use to determine their audience's size, location, needs and preferences. Outlets must find creative ways to connect with, and build, their audience. Diaspora audiences are also important to exiled media outlets, but they may have different needs that outlets have limited bandwidth to fulfil.

**Business models:** The local advertising market is largely closed off to exiled media in both their home and host countries, while global advertisers may have less interest in local audiences or may be less willing to partner with exiled media outlets because of concerns about brand safety. Home audiences may not be able to pay for media content or access payment gateways. As a result, exiled media largely rely on donor funding. While welcome, this can be irregular and inflexible. The country of registration may render an outlet ineligible for donor funding, and involve higher operating costs than a donor can support. In addition, donors may not fund outlets serving certain countries for fear of upsetting diplomatic relations with the regime.

**Transnational repression:** Even in exile, staff working for exiled media outlets may face myriad forms of transnational harassment. On a personal level, these can include online harassment and physical intimidation, threats to their friends and relatives, and arrest warrants and charges in absentia. On an organisational level, harassment can include threats to staff and operations based in the home country, blocking websites, hacking social media accounts, surveillance, defamation and a deluge of pro-government content to drown out and discourage legitimate media.

Exiled media outlets are addressing these various challenges by constantly adapting their





operations and workflows, developing creative approaches to understanding their audiences from afar, identifying new distribution channels and revenue streams, and prioritising their personal and organisational security. Yet they need more support from the media development sector in order to continue their work.

## Recommendations

Based on the research findings and a validation process with media support practitioners, Flight and Fight contains recommendations for media support practitioners, donors and governments. Above all, there is a need for a more coherent and ambitious strategy to support exiled media outlets. Specific areas for action are outlined below.

### Recommendations for Donors and Media Support Implementers

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- **DUE DILIGENCE:** Identify and support only exiled media outlets that demonstrate a clear commitment to providing balanced, impartial information and serving the needs of target audiences.
- **PREPAREDNESS:** Remain alert to the signs that pressure is building on independent media in a given country. Support media outlets to consider, and prepare for, ways to sustain their services in the face of the specific challenges they face. This includes support to identify the most appropriate host country if they need to relocate some or all of their operations.
- **LEGAL SUPPORT:** Increase the availability of ongoing legal support that reflects the unique complexity of running a hybrid media outlet spanning multiple countries, including regimes that are volatile or hostile to them. Support outlets to register an appropriate organisational model and remain compliant with tax, employment and media law in their host country.
- **PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT:** Build in opportunities for exiled journalists to access psychosocial support wherever possible.
- **HOLISTIC SECURITY AUDIT AND ONGOING SUPPORT:** Support extensive security audits spanning the physical, digital and legal risks faced by exiled media outlets, with actionable recommendations suited to low-resource organisations. Provide ongoing digital security support via a helpdesk.

- **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Provide ongoing professional and organisational development tailored to the specific needs of each media outlet, including peer support through which exiled outlets can learn from each other.
- **UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES AND IMPACT:** Support outlets to maximise their use of digital analytics tools, and develop alternative approaches such as surveys to fill gaps in understanding their audiences' needs, preferences, and the reach and impact of their content. Remain flexible around definitions of impact where reach is hard to measure and typical methods of impact evaluation are not feasible.
- **ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND OPERATING MODEL:** Support media outlets to adopt the appropriate organisational structure and operating model to deliver information in-country, while recognising the need for flexibility as needs evolve.
- **DONOR FUNDING:** Acknowledge that most exiled media outlets will require donor funding, that is sufficiently flexible to let them respond to rapidly changing contexts, and to undertake strategy development, fundraising and reporting without distracting from their core mission. Pressure to develop alternative revenue streams and an overly rigid focus on reaching specific audiences or targets may be unrealistic or have unintended negative consequences.
- **SAFE SPACES TO CONVENE:** Recognise the particular challenges faced by media staff who are disconnected from their colleagues in terms of location, experience and levels of personal risk. Support safe spaces where they can come together in person to bond, work on organisational strategy and receive psychosocial support.
- **OVERCOMING DIGITAL CENSORSHIP:** Help exiled media outlets prepare for challenges including internet shutdowns, throttling and content blocking. Support them to enable audiences to access content without having to set up VPNs, to produce evidence-based content distribution strategies and to hire staff to produce content for platforms that are more difficult to censor, such as YouTube, Telegram, podcasts or SMS short-codes.
- **NETWORKING:** Support existing, or instigate new, professional networks among the exiled media community to help practitioners share solutions and engage with donors.
- **PLATFORM ENGAGEMENT:** Enable exiled media outlets to engage in collective advocacy with social media companies to influence the visibility of credible, independent and trusted media content.

## Recommendations for Governments

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- **SAFE REFUGE:** Increase the number of specialist, long-term visas for journalists in exile. Develop processes to support journalists leaving their home country, including guidance on appropriate destinations, immigration and asylum processes, and programmes to help them integrate into their host country.
- **REGISTRATION:** Consider developing a distinct organisational registration category for exiled media outlets that enables them to access donor funding, generate commercial and audience revenue and straddle different regulatory jurisdictions.
- **TRANSNATIONAL HARASSMENT:** Protect exiled journalists by raising awareness of transnational threats at host country government and law enforcement levels, understanding the prevalence of this harassment, identifying offender regimes/groups, and providing enhanced security and refugee status where possible.
- **LEGISLATION:** Promote a legal and regulatory environment domestically and globally that supports and protects freedom of expression and information, and a free and open internet.

# 1. Introduction

*How can the media development community support exiled media outlets to survive and continue their work?* By asking this question, this report aims to contribute to a shared understanding of the issues exiled media outlets face, but also highlight strategies they are deploying to overcome challenges. It achieves this through qualitative research interviews with representatives from 25 media outlets serving audiences in Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba, Syria, Libya, Iran, Yemen, Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Myanmar, Hong Kong, China, Turkmenistan, Russia and Azerbaijan.

This research took place at a time when there have never been more independent media outlets in exile. While the literature uses various definitions of “exile,” this report refers to **media outlets that operate either partly or fully outside the country in which their audience is based**. They may have been founded in that “home” country and forced to relocate – by conflict or an increasingly hostile environment for freedom of expression – or founded in a “host” country. These outlets may be a rare source of independent information to people in spaces with restricted press freedom. In such circumstances, they can play a crucial role in providing an alternative to regime narratives and disinformation, and in holding authorities accountable. Exile is rarely a temporary state, so media outlets operating in exile must establish ways to reconfigure and sustain their operations from afar.

The international media support community increasingly recognises exiled media outlets as a distinct group with specific needs, and appears committed to finding ways to support them. This community wishes to understand the challenges exiled media face, in order to support solutions. While a body of academic and practitioner literature is emerging around this topic, it remains difficult to surface a clear set of issues at a basis for action. Exiled media outlets are geographically dispersed, fragmented and largely working under the radar, so their experiences and needs may not be very visible. There are also limited opportunities for this group to come together to learn from each other and develop a shared platform through which to organise and advocate. While an increase in public panels and discussions around media outlets in exile is welcome, these tend to highlight the experiences of journalists from high-profile crisis situations. There are many more whose experiences remain less widely understood.

The objective of this research is threefold, to:

1. Bring a more coherent structure to collective understanding of the exiled media landscape by offering a detailed analysis of the various settings in which exiled media outlets operate.



2. Unravel the challenges exiled media outlets encounter and explore how they navigate them.
3. To amplify the voices and experiences of exiled media practitioners from under-represented regions and ensure these are reflected in the growing number of global conversations on these issues.

This report has five sections. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 offers a comprehensive literature review outlining the state of exiled media since around 2015. Section 3 establishes the research gap around this issue, and presents the research objectives, research question and sub-questions in more detail, and outlines the methodology and general approach taken to this study.

Section 4 presents and discusses the research findings, including the different realities exiled media outlets can face. It argues that there is a difference between structural conditions and challenges that tend to manifest at the organisational level, which outlets may have more agency to overcome with the right support. This analytical differentiation is then used in section 5, the conclusion, to synthesise findings and answer the overarching research question. Based on this, it also offers a set of recommendations for practitioners, funders and governments.



## 2. Literature Review

This literature review offers an overview of the body of knowledge that has been published on the topic of exiled media, outlines why media outlets in exile must be considered a “new normal,” and summarises the various challenges for these outlets that are set out in the literature.

### 2.1 Press Freedom Under Pressure and Exiled Journalism as the “New Normal”

The situation for free press and independent journalism is worsening. According to the 2023 [World Press Freedom Index](#) – which evaluates the environment for journalism in 180 countries and territories – the situation can be described as “very serious” in 31 countries, “difficult” in 42, “problematic” in 55, and “good” or “satisfactory” in 52. In other words, the environment for journalism is “bad” in seven out of 10 countries, and satisfactory in only three out of 10 (Reporters without Borders, 2023b).

In comparison, in the World Press Freedom Index in 2013, the environment for journalism was classified as “very serious” in 20 countries. This means that countries in the “very serious” category have risen by 55 percent in a decade. As greater numbers of countries around the globe become more authoritarian or suppress independent media, working as a journalist is increasingly dangerous, difficult or impossible. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists’ (CPJ) annual prison census found that 320 journalists were imprisoned in 2023 — the [second-highest](#) recorded by CPJ since the census began in 1992 (Getz, 2023).

The global deterioration of free press has fuelled an exodus of media outlets and journalists from their countries of origin (“home countries”). While there is no exact count of exiled journalists and media outlets, hundreds of individuals have asked for assistance in recent years. In 2020, CPJ provided immigration support letters and grants for necessities like rent and food to journalists in exile 63 times. This increased to 206 times in 2022, an increase of 227 percent (Westcott, 2023). Similarly, Reporters without Borders (RSF) count that of the 363 financial grants that its Assistance Desk has made to journalists from 42 countries since the start of 2022, 70 percent have gone to journalists in exile. RSF has also written more than 400 letters to support visa or asylum applications by journalists who have fled their home country (Reporters without Borders, 2023a). Benazzo (2023) estimates that there are just over 100 media outlets residing fully or partly in exile.



The reasons for journalists leaving their home country are various, and depend on the political situation of the country and the relationship between governments and free press. As Westcott (2023) states, independent media often have a public profile and are on the government radar. Governments increasingly apply repressive tactics if they do not want certain topics to be covered or exposed, which can make the life of journalists and their families difficult and dangerous.

Politics and corruption are particular threats to the free press, as White et al. (2023) emphasise. Journalists who expose corruption, crime, human rights violations, and other abuses are targeted by governments. Repression tactics include assault, detention, kidnapping, imprisonment, unlawful deportation, and serious limitations on freedom of movement (Foster, 2019). It also includes intimidating family members, digital harassment, smear campaigns, doxing (sharing their identity or private information online), and other attempts to prevent truthful reporting (White et al., 2023, p. 1). As White et al. (2023) point out, these threats do not necessarily stop once journalists are in exile — transnational repression can also target exiled journalists.

## 2.2 Growing Attention Towards Exiled Media

Journalists in exile can be traced back to the late 18th century (Ristow, 2011). But since around 2015, the international aid and media support community and academia have significantly sharpened their focus on exiled media, seeing their role both as crucial information providers and to counter anti-democratic regimes.

Today, exile media outlets are recognised as important actors in the information ecosystem, with two major roles. Firstly, they are seen as vital in providing accurate information about their home countries to audiences at home and elsewhere. In fact, thanks to their unique insights, knowledge, and contacts, they are often the only source of reliable or verified information on what is happening inside an authoritarian country or in a conflict zone (White et al., 2023; Benazzo, 2023). Their reporting provides crucial information that might be hard or impossible for foreign media to obtain. Secondly, exiled media are seen as key to resisting autocratisation and reversing democratic backsliding, Benazzo (2023) emphasises. They do this by holding the powerful to account, uncovering abuses and rights violations, providing factual information, and representing marginalised groups (White et al., 2023).

Understanding the impact of exiled media efforts is challenging, Ristow (2011, p. 4) reflects, but their relevance includes informing the outside world while also upholding a “structure of

independent journalism that someday could be re-established at home.”

The volume of literature on exiled media outlets has steadily increased since 2011. Ristow (2011) produced a pioneering report commissioned by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) providing detailed insights on the phenomenon of exiled journalists. These findings were further enriched by Attfield (2013) and Sadouskaya (2011) who offer a thorough examination on exiled media. There followed a series of academic publications that grapple with various aspects of the identity of journalists in exile. These included: investigating the practices and integration of Venezuelan journalists in South Florida (Shumow, 2014); exploring the motivations and professional standards of exiled journalists (O’Loughlin & Schafraad, 2016). They also include understanding how the self-perceived roles of change agents, activists, and journalists blur through exiled media outlets’ journalistic practices (Balasundaram, 2019), digital networks (Arafat, 2021), and experience of physical and digital threats (Porlezza & Arafat, 2022). These studies centre individual journalists’ perceptions and practices, while Cook (2016) examines exiled media outlets’ revenue models and financial sustainability, and Benazzo (2023) offers a systematic overview of exiled organisations.

The rise of the number of exiled media practitioners seeking support since around 2019, as highlighted by RSF and the CPJ, and some high-profile crises, have attracted more international attention to the phenomenon of exiled media. For example, the Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022 came with significant risks for independent media in both countries. Those dangers received unprecedented coverage in mainstream media and blog posts, with a bias towards exiled media from these high-profile countries (Bathke, 2023; Katz Marston, 2023; Philp, 2022; Venkina, 2023; Yablokov, 2022). This stands in contrast to exiled media from more overlooked countries, such as Sudan or Yemen.

These developments put further pressure on the international community to understand better exiled journalists’ struggles in order to improve support for them. This has led to a handful of more systematic case studies and reports commissioned or conducted by media development organisations and foundations on the challenges faced by media outlets in exile.

## 2.3 A Web of Challenges for Exiled Media and Journalists

Broadly, the literature agrees on four thematic, sometimes overlapping, challenges that exiled media outlets face:





- Operating an exiled outlet
- Safety and security issues
- Personal impacts and professional/personal support networks
- Revenue

The literature on each of these challenges is summarised below.

## Operating an Exiled Media Outlet

Managing a media outlet that has either moved into exile, or was founded in exile and needs to operate in a decentralised way, brings various challenges. These include legal registration, taxation and compliance with the laws and regulations of the host country as Foster (2019, p. 15) points out. Furthermore, most exiled media have three key audiences: in-country, diaspora, and donor. These audiences all require attention and engagement, which is difficult. Often, exiled media outlets must diversify their distribution channels to target specific audiences and overcome attempts to block their content.

Websites, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X (Twitter) and region-specific social media platforms are often key here (Free Press Unlimited, 2022). Social media is an important distribution channel and can also yield useful data about audience reach and engagement, but it comes with significant downsides. Facebook and other social media platforms keep the main share of revenue, and do little to combat hate speech, reminds Foster (2019). In addition, these platforms' content moderation systems can be weaponised to suppress credible content. The blunt application of rules and use of automated detection means this can also happen erroneously. Exclusion lists can restrict advertising revenue.

Moreover, home country governments might shut down domestic internet services, or block access to international websites and social media platforms to hinder information access. Foster (2019, p. 18) adds that governments blocking media outlets' websites (consequently also blocking any advertising revenue), jamming shortwave radio signals, and expanding the use of government propaganda promoting false narratives, are other tactics that cause severe operational challenges for exiled media outlets.

Another management challenge that exiled outlets face is high staff turnover, because exiled media outlets have to pay lower salaries than more commercial rivals (Foster 2019, p. 12). The final management issue for exiled media outlets is the reach and use of sources to produce credible reporting. It takes a great effort to verify information and provide accurate reporting



when operating from a host country rather than a home country, due to physical distance (Hlinovská & de Schutter, 2021).

## Safety and Security Issues

The literature shows that security is another major concern for exiled media outlets. While threats to life, or risks of detention, physical and digital harassment, intimidation, and the raiding of offices, are common reasons to leave their home country, journalists are not necessarily safe once in exile. Risks remain for journalists in exile, whether they reside in countries that are more or less hostile to press freedom (White et al., 2023, pp. 4–5).

Transnational threats reaching exiled media outlets and practitioners include legal harassment (ongoing criminal investigations or prosecutions in their home countries), physical threats such as kidnapping, and digital threats. The latter include online abuse, which is especially severe for female journalists, and surveillance, which hinders direct contact with sources or colleagues remaining in the home country. Online harassment of journalists can involve trolling campaigns, systematic hateful commenting, and slanderous disinformation targeting them (Free Press Unlimited, 2022).

Foster (2019) notes that safety issues also apply to media staff who remain in the home country, together with stringers and citizen journalists, advertisers, and audiences who try to access exiled media outlets' content. Free Press Unlimited, (2022, p. 6) details that many reporters working from within the home country confront two types of threats: police violence and detentions, and social media attacks that overlap with offline reality. These various digital threats make it difficult for exiled media outlets to operate safely, and it is expensive to keep their digital safety up-to-date (Foster, 2019).

## Personal Impacts of Being in Exile and Professional/Personal Support Networks

Journalists who intend to leave their home country often find themselves prevented by restrictive asylum policies (Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2023). When they do leave, moving into exile brings trauma and stress that has impacts on their wellbeing and mental health. This includes personal challenges such as leaving families and friends, social isolation and struggles integrating into their host countries, but also uncertainty over their professional future (Free Press Unlimited, 2022, p. 7). Exiled journalists are often under pressure to make decisions quickly. If they cannot find work in their host countries in the medium term, they may have to give up journalism or retrain (Koerber Stiftung, 2023, p. 7). In addition, there is the bureaucratic stress created by trying to obtain visas and work permits. Westcott (2023)



observes that exiled journalists struggle with the long wait for visas and often feel overwhelmed by immigration policies.

Many exiled journalists and media outlets struggle with isolation in their host countries, and navigating complex registration and administrative processes, as outlined above. Professional/ personal support networks and opportunities to connect are vitally important, but limited (Radsch, 2023). Hlinovská & de Schutter (2021) point out that networks are not entirely absent. Some exiled media outlets organise themselves, for example, the Network of Exiled Media Outlets (NEMO).

## Revenue

Financial sustainability is a continuous obstacle for media outlets in exile. As Free Press Unlimited, (2022, p.9) points out, CIMA's 2011 report identifies financial struggles and funding concerns as the top challenge for exiled media outlets. More than 10 years later, they remain a major issue.

Media outlets that have been founded in exile have often been supported with donor funding from the beginning. In contrast outlets that were originally based in their home country could often operate without donor funding because they had some sort of commercial or audience revenue, but lost these sources of income when they had to leave or when crisis upended the home country media advertising market (Radsch 2023, p. 59).

Consequently, donor funding tends to be the main source of income for media outlets in exile (Free Press Unlimited, 2022; Hlinovská & de Schutter, 2021). However, this presents various challenges. Firstly, access to funding is difficult and relies on contact and trusting relationships with donors, both of which can be hard to establish as a newly exiled outlet (Hlinovská & de Schutter, 2021). Secondly, extensive bureaucratic efforts, reporting mechanisms and administrative procedures put a heavy burden on exiled outlets (Cook, 2016), and overdependence on donors can limit editorial freedom (Hlinovská & de Schutter, 2021, p. 22). Thirdly, donor funding cycles are often short-term, which makes funding inconsistent (Hlinovská & de Schutter, 2021). Foster (2019, p. 25) also emphasises the challenge of donors providing short-term and outcome-oriented project funding rather than general, ongoing support to media outlets.

Another challenge in relation to donor funding are "attention waves." Donors may shift their attention and funds to places where abrupt crises emerge. Once media outlets are no longer on the priority list, this leads to a decrease of donor support (Free Press Unlimited, 2022, p. 9). However, Hlinovská & de Schutter (2021, p. 21) point out that what might appear to be an

improved situation, such as the absence of war, relatively stable economic situation, or more stable political situation in a media outlet's home country "do not mean that exiled media can safely return to the country and resume independent reporting." Moreover, some institutional donors, such as embassies or UN agencies, can be restricted in their choice of media support for diplomatic reasons, meaning that supporting exiled media from a specific home country might jeopardise diplomatic relations with that country (Free Press Unlimited, 2022, p. 9).

While donor funding remains essential, exiled media outlets would ideally have diversified revenue streams to avoid the "grand dependency cycle" (Cook, 2016, p. 10). Ways to diversify revenues include monetisation from audiences, such as subscriptions, crowdfunding or micro-donations but this is very difficult to achieve. Exiled media cannot participate in their host country media market, nor that of their home country (Free Press Unlimited, 2022, p. 9). This often makes advertising revenue impossible. Foster (2019, p.27) summarises the challenge as follows: "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."



# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Research Gaps, Questions & Objectives

Collectively, the studies discussed in the literature review outline a critical role for the international community in supporting exiled media outlets, and that community's desire to better understand outlets' needs, and target their programming and advocacy accordingly.

However, it is difficult to make the experiences and needs of exiled media outlets visible in any systematic way because they are geographically dispersed and linguistically diverse, and operate under heightened security protocols.

While the literature demonstrates growing academic and practitioner interest in exiled media outlets, there remains a need to highlight effective strategies that can be replicated across the media development sector.

To help address these research gaps, this report aims to amplify the needs expressed by a diversity of exiled media outlets, including those serving communities in countries away from the global spotlight.

The research question underpinning this report and its underlying research is: *How can the media development community support exiled media outlets to survive and continue their work?*

The report centres the experiences and perceptions of exiled media practitioners in answering three sub-questions:

1. How do media outlets operate in various exiled settings, and what are the challenges they encounter as they seek to survive and sustain operations?
2. What practical strategies do media outlets adopt to navigate these challenges?
3. What support do they most need from the wider media development community?

The research focused on the perceptions and experiences of exiled media outlets themselves. The analytical value of this report is in systematically organising the needs they expressed, and to facilitate a nuanced understanding of how to support exiled media outlets to sustain their operations.

This research has three objectives. Firstly, it builds a better understanding about how exiled



media outlets operate. Secondly, it identifies the challenges these outlets face, what they need to survive and continue their work, and what they already do to overcome challenges. Thirdly, it amplifies the experiences of exiled media practitioners from under-represented home countries.

## 3.2 General Approach to the Study

To answer the research questions, this research followed a qualitative comparative case study design inspired by a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Due to the inherently explorative nature of the study, the primary goal is to devise new understanding and models that are grounded in data, and reflect the perspectives and experiences of the people being studied, focussing on research participants' own interpretations and experiences. This approach is rather inductive, meaning that new models are developed from the data rather than the other way around. The data is used to build a definition of "exiled media," and categories about exiled media outlets' experiences and perceptions, to bring a more structured understanding of their situations and challenges. The research process was iterative, meaning there was a constant interplay between data, definitions and analysis.

## 3.3 Sampling Strategy

Many dimensions of the exiled media experience merit exploration, but the focus of this study is on how these outlets maintain their operations in order to sustain their missions. Consequently, the research sample included media outlets rather than individual journalists.

An important aim of this study was to amplify diverse voices from outlets serving audiences in home countries currently receiving less international attention. They may have moved into focus during a national event that affected press freedom that sparked international interest, such as a new security law or renewed conflict, but this attention and external support may have subsequently waned. **Table 1** outlines the home countries included in this study.

**Table 1.** Countries Included in the Study

<b>REGION</b>	<b>COUNTRIES</b>
<b>Americas</b>	Venezuela, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Cuba
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>	Syria, Libya, Iran, Yemen
<b>Africa</b>	Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea
<b>Eurasia</b>	Turkmenistan, Russia, Azerbaijan
<b>Asia</b>	Myanmar, Hong Kong, China



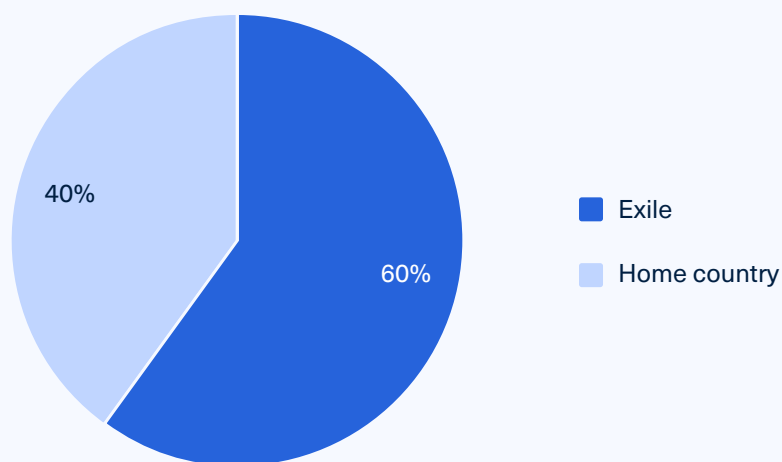
This study used purposeful and snowball sampling to gather a comprehensive sample of 25 media outlets that are “in exile.” The sample size of 25 was chosen when data saturation was achieved.

Following a grounded theory approach, the definition of “in exile” was kept deliberately broad at the beginning of the data collection process to mean a media outlet that operated partly or fully from outside their home country. This enabled capture of the various and different exiled realities before repeatedly refining the definition in response to the data. For example, “exile” tends to suggest that the individual or outlet has had to leave their home country, but the iterative research process revealed that some did not make that transition. In fact, 40 percent of media outlets in the sample were first established in their home country, but 60 percent were founded in exile (see [Figure 1](#)). Irrespective of where they started out, these media outlets serve a primary audience from their home country, and operate partly or fully from a host country.

Eventually, the inductive research approach enabled formulation of the following definition of exiled media, which was shaped by the data and, in turn, shaped the sampling strategy:

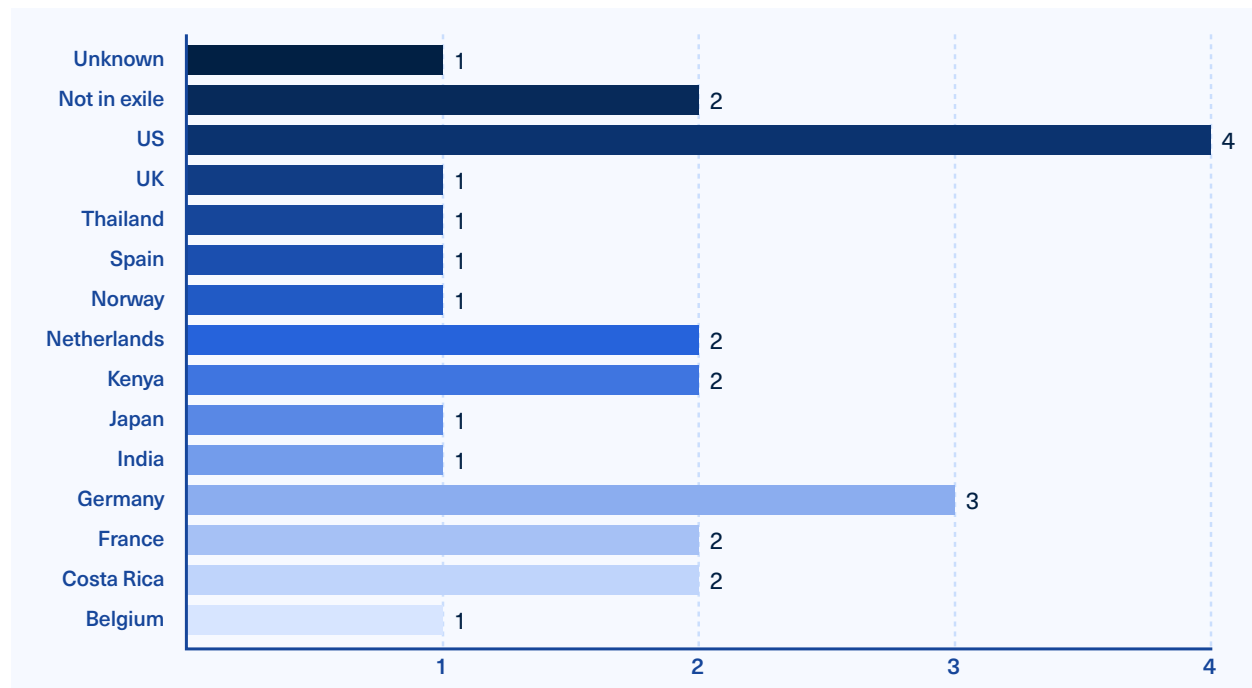
*“Exiled media” refers to media outlets that operate either partly or fully from outside their home country — due to closing spaces and a hostile political and legal environment for independent media leaving them with reduced press freedom and exposing them to security and safety risk. Exiled media serve their home audience as a primary audience with unbiased information, regardless of whether they were founded outside or inside their home country.*

**Figure 1.** Foundation Location of Exiled Media Outlets Included in this Study



**Figure 2** indicates the host countries of the exiled outlets included in this study. Most are based in European countries (11) and the US (4), but others are based in Thailand (1), Kenya (2), Costa Rica (2), Japan (1) or India (1). One outlet's host country is unknown, one is inside its home country but prepares to leave, and one outlet is not in exile but hosts exiled journalists.

**Figure 2. Host Countries of Exiled Media Included in this Study**



## 3.4 Data Collection

This research employed four data collection methods:

1. A desk review and initial, unstructured conversations with exiled media support practitioners (October – November 2023) to narrow down the research focus. The desk review included published and grey literature, such as case studies, journalistic articles, and policy and implementation reports.
2. Semi-structured interviews (November 2023 – January 2024) with representatives from 25 exiled media outlets. These interviews were designed to understand the specific settings and circumstances each outlet is operating in, and identify their missions and challenges. The aim was to identify patterns and points of divergence in their experiences, and what they do and need to achieve their organisational mission. The interviews were held online by the lead researcher via the interviewee's preferred tool. They took place in the interviewee's preferred language, with a translator present if necessary. Interviews took roughly 60 minutes and were recorded with the participants' consent.



3. Participant observations at thematic events, e.g. international conferences and virtual webinars (October 2023 – February 2024). The aim of this step was to triangulate findings from the interviews.
4. A validation session with seven informants (April 2024) who work with exiled media outlets. The aim of this process was to gain insights into the strategies they pursue to support exiled media, and combine that insight with the expressed needs of the 25 interviewees to inform actionable recommendations.

## 3.5 Data Analysis

Inspired by grounded theory and its iterative approach towards data analysis, the data collection and data analysis for this study proceeded in tandem. New insights helped to refine the interview questions and definitions, and vice versa.

Analysis of the interviews followed a thematic narrative analysis, and involved five steps, not in sequence but in a constant back and forth (Eckel, 2023):

- **Coding:** Key themes in interview segments were determined and allocated to broad codes.
- **Categorisation:** Similar ideas were used to form a hypothesis about the various models of operation in exile, and how challenges impose themselves differently on different outlets.
- **Refinement:** Categories were refined and adjusted.
- **Memos:** Field notes were used to back up analysis and triangulate results.
- **Integration:** Refined categories laid the basis for building the evidence narrative.

## 3.6 Ethical Considerations & Risk Mitigations

The risks associated with this research were minimal, but the safety and security of interview participants had the highest priority throughout the study, adhering to the “do no harm” principle. All interview participants were given a plain language and consent form before interviews. This explained the interview’s purpose, and how their data and anonymity would be protected and respected. Interview participation was voluntary, and interview participants were given the option to withdraw their participation at any point.

Interviewees’ names and personal information were disclosed only to the lead interviewer. These details were held in secure systems and destroyed on publication. All interview participants

have been assigned a pseudonym in the research data and related publications to safeguard their anonymity.

Once transcribed, all interview recordings were destroyed. All transcripts will be kept in password protected cloud storage for up to five years and accessible only to members of the research team.

## 3.7 Study Limitations

Qualitative research explores the meaning and experiences of people, and these can come with some drawbacks that are important to keep in mind when interpreting the findings.

Firstly, there is a risk for potential bias in answers because interviews took place between representatives of exiled media outlets and a researcher representing a media development organisation, carrying a certain power imbalance that possibly influenced the dynamic of the conversation.

Secondly, interview questions were developed without consulting exiled media practitioners themselves. There is always a risk of weak questions from researchers when questions are developed far from the research field, meaning the complexity of the research subject may not have been captured in full through the interviews. However, data triangulation and the validation session were implemented as measures to ensure the robustness and quality of findings.

Thirdly, a tight timeframe limited research process possibilities. Although the sample of 25 media outlets reflects data saturation, the overall data analysis happened under time pressure.

# 4. Research Findings

Once the web of complexity in which exiled media outlets operate is disentangled, it becomes apparent that they face two broad categories of challenge to their organisational continuity and sustainability: structural level and outlet level. While the former are imposed by the wider environment and difficult for exiled media to directly influence, media outlets have some agency to innovate practical strategies to overcome the latter.

Challenges on a structural level include:

- Legal and regulatory complexities in host countries, which make it difficult to relocate as an individual and to register a media outlet.
- International banking regulations that further complicate setting up functioning media outlets.
- International and economic sanctions that can conflict with media development priorities.
- Social media platforms' algorithms and policies that can limit the visibility, distribution and reach of content produced by exiled media outlets.

These all cause urgent needs that exiled media outlets have no power to address.

On the other hand, outlet-level challenges are obstacles that exiled media outlets face in their everyday operation that may be overcome with the right strategies and support. They include:

- Editorial, such as working with sources and verifying information from afar, as well as staffing challenges.
- The safety and security of the outlet's operations, staff, and audience.
- Audiences' information needs, especially understanding and engaging with different audience segments, as well as measuring the reach and impact of media content.
- Revenue, which involves transitioning from donor dependence, diversifying revenue, and organisational sustainability.

The latter challenge makes audience segmentation, and measuring reach and impact, difficult and therefore affects an outlet's success in securing donor funding and diversifying revenue streams.

This section discusses the various facets of these challenges at structural and outlet level. Firstly, it elaborates on the cases included in this study, further explaining exiled media outlets' various settings and operating models. Secondly, it identifies the challenges created by the structures in which exiled media outlets are embedded. Thirdly, it unpicks the outlet-level challenges that these outlets face, and highlights the practical strategies they adopt in boxes.

## 4.1 The Different Realities of Exile

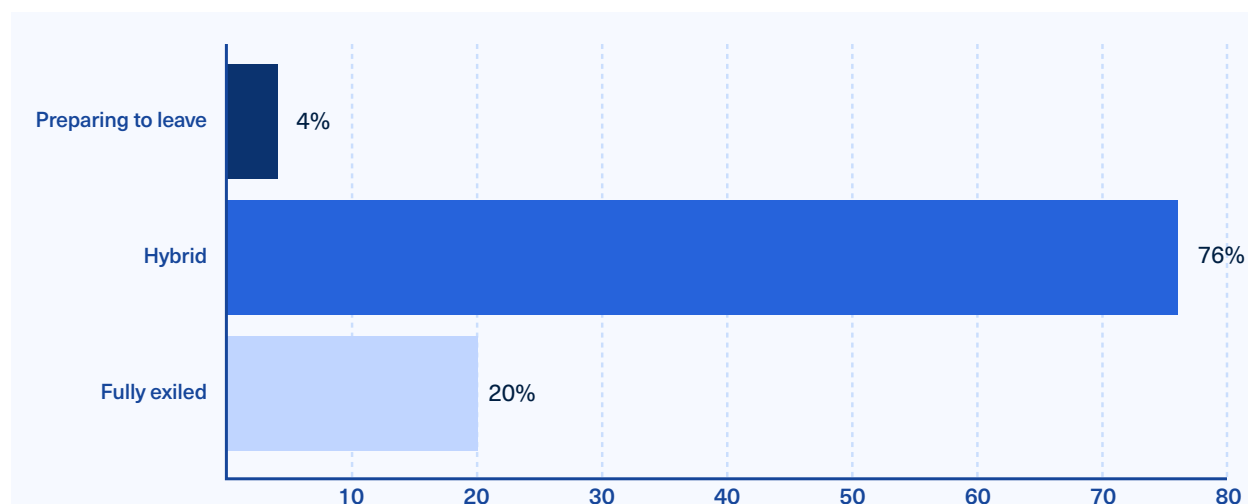
This section profiles the outlets included in this study, describing how they operate, their missions, their income sources, and distribution strategies — highlighting their heterogeneity.

### "Fully Exiled," "Hybrid," and "Preparing to Leave"

It is difficult to come up with a sharp typology of exiled media — their operating models and operating contexts initially seem very diverse. Although 84 percent of exiled media outlets are legally registered outside their home country, a glimpse into their operating models reveals a more complicated picture of what "exiled" might mean.

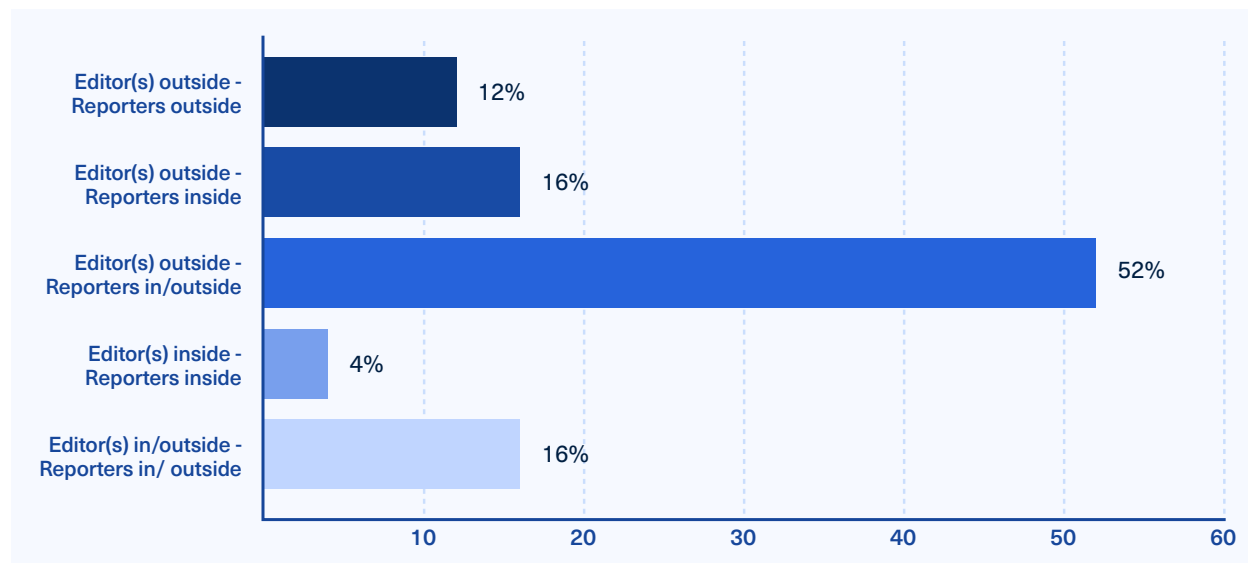
Of the 25 media outlets included in this study, 20 percent can be described as "fully exiled," while 76 percent take a "hybrid" form where some staff remain inside their home country and others outside (see [Figure 3](#)). One media outlet (4 percent of the sample) could be classified as "preparing to leave" at the time of the research interviews. This outlet had all editors and reporters inside the home country and no legal registration elsewhere. However, it has been included in this study because it was contemplating the measures it will need to take should the home country situation worsen.

**Figure 3.** Media Outlets' Type of Exile



To understand the nuances of what these terms mean in more detail, it is helpful to review their operating models (see **Figure 4** “Fully exiled” means that all staff (editor/s *and* reporters) are located outside their home country. However, “hybrid” can take different forms — often a mix of editor/s and reporters being located inside and outside their home country. Most commonly, the editor/s is/are in exile, while at least some or all reporters remain inside the home country. These reporters are often freelancers or citizen journalists, and obtaining information from them, paying them, and protecting them and other sources inside the home country, is both vital and beset with challenges.

**Figure 4. Exiled Media Outlets' Operating Models**



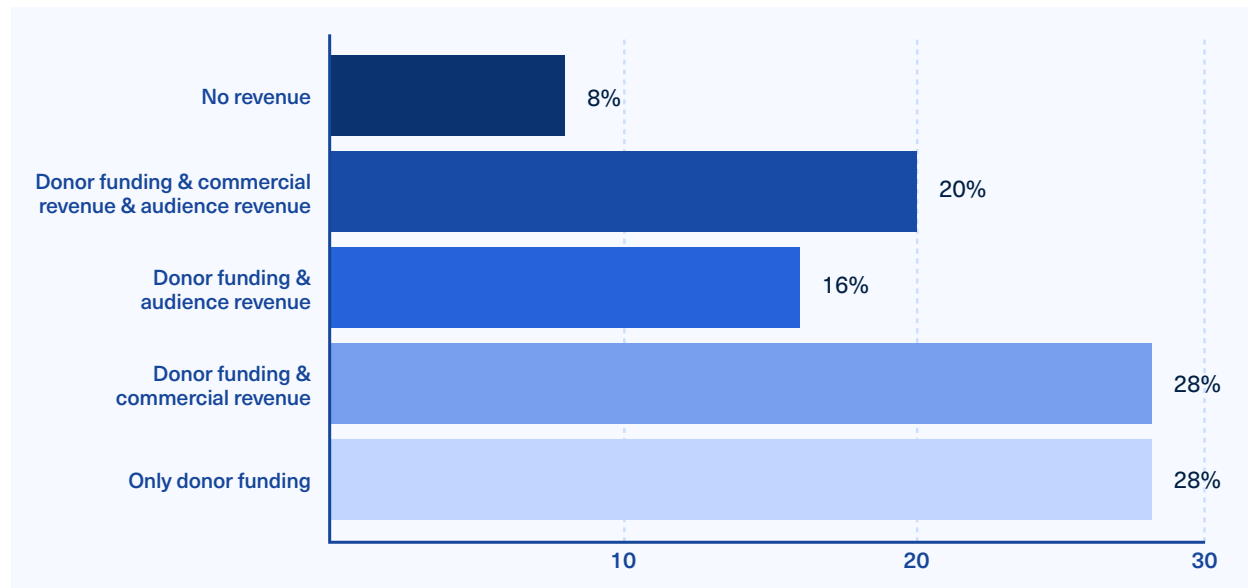
## Revenue: Donor-Focused, With Some Commercially-Generated Income

All but two of the 25 media outlets included in this study either fully or mainly depend on funding from institutional or philanthropic sources (see **Figure 5**). Some 28 percent report donor funding as their sole source of income. Most have more than one income source: 28 percent have some income from commercial sources in addition to donor funding; 16 percent rely mainly on donor funding but generate some audience revenue; and 20 percent rely mainly on donor funding but also have some commercial and audience revenue. Some 8 percent (two outlets) say they have no revenue at all.

Commercial revenue streams for exiled media outlets include selling production services, consultancy work, selling ebooks, translation services, and advertising (from international organisations such as UN agencies, international NGOs and think tanks). Audience revenue includes memberships, subscriptions and donations from readers.

Four interviewees say they have had to use their own money to keep going, and three say they have turned down “rich individuals” who offered them money to sustain their outlet in return for avoiding certain topics.

**Figure 5. Exiled Media Outlets' Sources of Revenue**



## A Shared Mission: Independent Journalism for Home Country Audiences

The interview data revealed a common self-perception among media outlets that their mission is to provide impartial information. They describe themselves variously as “an independent voice,” providers of “trusted, responsible, impartial journalism” or “uncensored news.”

Interviewees describe organisational missions that include promoting “democracy and social solidarity” and “to hold power to account.” A word cloud of interview data about exiled media outlets’ missions showed that “independent” was the word most frequently used — signifying impartiality, a voice not silenced.

Some outlets’ missions also have an educational component, such as to build the capacity of journalists or to boost the profession of journalism in their home country. A few produce reporting and analysis pieces to educate policy makers or advocate for a certain policy in their home country, for example, in the area of climate change. However, none of the outlets in this study see themselves as opposition media. As one interviewee puts it:

*“We are sometimes confused with opposition media ... We’re not opposing anyone. We are journalists who have been working in our country, but the government*

*does not like us and the media environment was not safe ... and we were kicked out.” (Interviewee AA)*

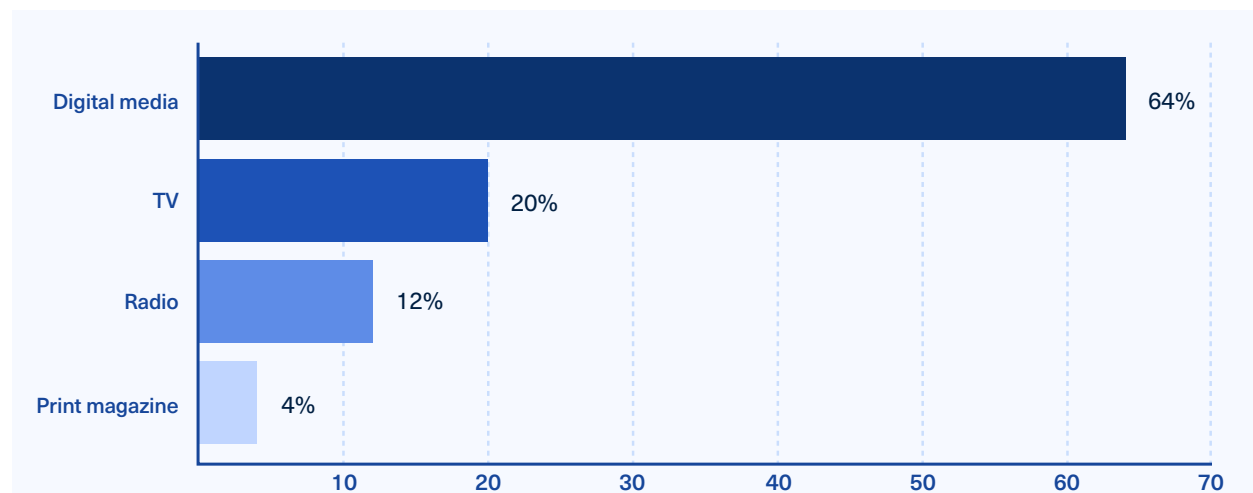
Another thread connecting the 25 media outlets is a deep concern about people in their home country, particularly the most marginalised communities, such as women, youth and minority ethnic groups. In fact, their missions articulate the primary importance of serving the audience inside the home country. Various interviewees mentioned the motivation to inform, engage or inspire an audience inside and outside the home country, with a focus on those inside.

Despite this focus, exiled media outlets also serve other stakeholders — notably diaspora populations and donors (Foster 2019, p.15). These audiences have different needs, which outlets say they do not always have the resources to meet. Some outlets also envisage a broader audience of linguistic communities. For example, they may address Arabic- or Spanish-speaking people interested in their home country. Some produce additional content in English in order to keep their home country on the global radar while ensuring its stories are told by those who know them best. This may have the secondary benefit of improving search engine optimisation and helping to evade local language content moderation (Radsch 2023, p. 67). This reporting is often targeted at international organisations, NGOs, international media, think tanks, and academics, but also individuals with an interest in their country.

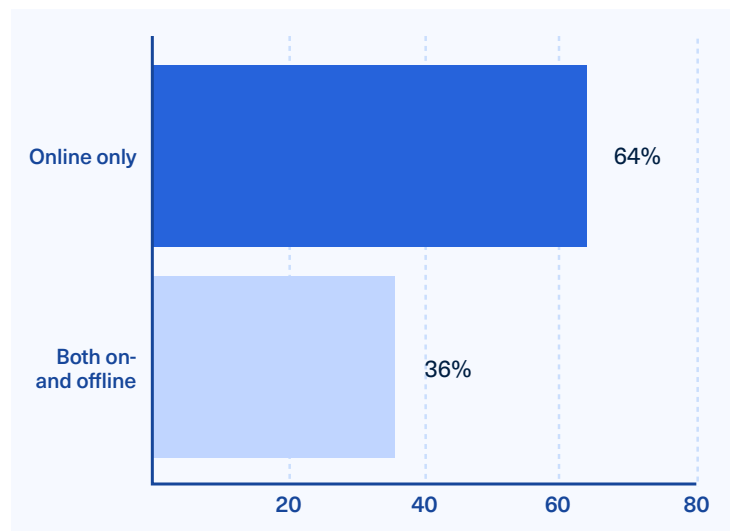
## The Dominance of Online Content

**Figure 6** shows the main type of media content produced by the outlets included in this study. Nearly two-thirds (64 percent) publish only on digital platforms, while 20 percent broadcast on TV, 12 percent on the radio, and one outlet (4 percent) runs a print magazine.

**Figure 6.** Main Type of Content Produced by Exiled Media Outlets



**Figure 7. Overall Types of Content Produced by Exiled Media Outlets**



In reality, most of the outlets produce multiple types of content (see **Figure 7**). The 36 percent of outlets that primarily produce TV and radio content or a print magazine also distribute content online. Overall, 100 percent of outlets share content online, via their website and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), Telegram and TikTok.

## 4.2 Structural-Level Challenges

Understanding the realities for exiled media outlets means, as a first step, taking the wider structure in which they operate into account. As outlined above and examined in more detail below, the data analysis and literature review reveal at least five elements that create additional pressure for exiled media outlets:

- Complex and unfamiliar laws and regulations inside the host country that complicate and lengthen the process of registration and require new compliance regimes around HR, tax and media or non-profit law.
- Economic sanctions that hinder an outlet's ability to register appropriately, open bank accounts and engage with global credit or payment systems.
- Occasional tensions between diplomatic and media development priorities.
- Eligibility issues to apply for funding that serves an exiled media outlet's region.
- Issues with social media platforms' algorithms, content moderation policies and verification process.

### Registration and Legal Status

Registering their organisation is one of the first steps exiled media outlets must take in order to operate as a legal entity. Registration is a key part of securing accreditation, receiving grants and donations, and opening a bank account in the host country. Formal registration is also necessary to access some platform-specific benefits for the journalism community, such as the Google News Initiative or Facebook News Partnership (Radsch 2023, p. 34).

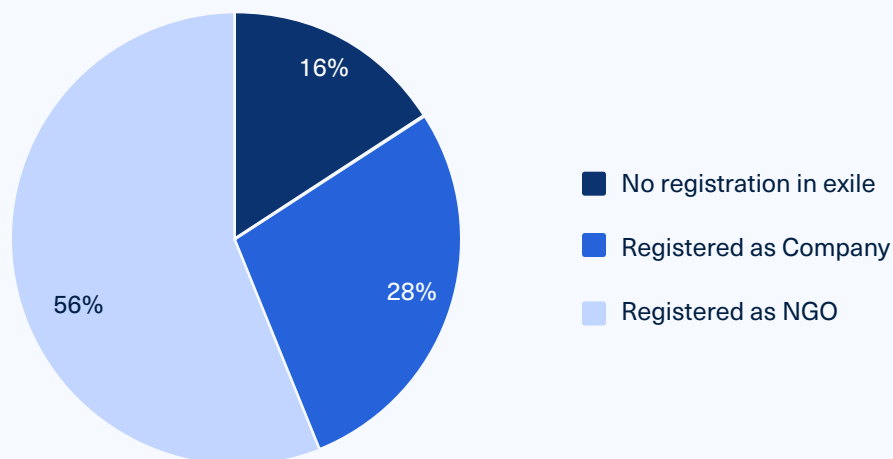


One interviewee describes the steps they are taking in case they need to leave the country:

*"I was really worried about it ... As a first step, I talked to our donors and explained our situation: 'Is there a way you can send us the money outside of [home country]?' Some donors ... said we can send the money into your personal account. With other donors ... they had their protocols and processes, and there was no flexibility. Then we started the legal process to register our outlet in [host country] ... It took two years ... Then we made an agreement with an organisation ... that helps journalists with evacuations. So if we need to flee, they can help ... We hope to stay as long as possible in [home country] but at least we are prepared to leave."* (Interviewee X)

Preparedness is key, and overseas registration and opening a bank account are two actions that media outlets can take before relocating abroad. There are usually two registration options — registering as a for-profit company, which requires paying taxes in the host country, or as a not-for-profit organisation or civil society organisation (summarised in this report as “NGOs”). **Figure 8** shows the legal status of the exiled media outlets: 56 percent are registered as an NGO, 28 percent as a company, and 16 percent (three outlets) have no legal registration in exile.

**Figure 8.** Exiled Media Outlets' Legal Status in Host Country



Certain types of registration may restrict or increase media outlets' eligibility for funding. As Radsch (2023, p. 34) shows, interviewees have found it challenging to navigate the legal, administrative, financial and tax implications of registration in their host country, but their revenue strategy depends on whether they are registered as an NGO or company. In turn, the choice of registration type depends on their revenue strategy.

Not all donors will fund a for-profit media company, leaving them largely dependent on commercial or audience revenue. On the other hand, there may be restrictions on a non-profit's ability to raise commercial revenue. Some interviewees share a concern that they registered under the wrong category as they struggled to understand available options and how different types of registration would affect their activities and revenue generation. For example, some registered as an NGO because they did not know whether they could afford to pay the tax and meet other legal requirements of a company. Several interviewees wish there was a third type of entity that could account for their unique position in their host country:

*"For the registration in France, we had to register as a nonprofit organisation... we could not register as a media outlet because we would have a totally different set of rules and obligations ... So we ... wish there is ... a framework or legislation or something for a media in exile ... We wanted to register as a private company ... which probably is what other media outlets ... in France would do ... [but] that means that we would have a lot of taxes to pay, which is not possible with the limited budget that we have ... We want to work within the law, but we just find it difficult to find that framework that provides us with the flexibilities."*

(Interviewee B)

One outlet initially registered as a for-profit company, then made attempts to change that but still struggles to find an appropriate legal status:

*"When we were registered as a for-profit ... we just went through the quickest route to register as a private company limited by shares. And then it happens to have some problem ... that ... when we registered, we didn't know. There is something called CIC [community interest company] here ... We would like to have ... changed into a CIC because we are not for profit ... [and] we should not be a charity ... And we have difficulty to change ourselves from a private limited company by shares into [a] CIC. I've tried for many months ... to fill in the forms and to complete the articles of association."* (Interviewee M)

This all contributes to anxiety that exiled media outlets may face legal issues in the host country, and a perceived need for overcompliance (Researcher's field notes, 2024). Moreover, outlets struggle to find legal support or advice that is specific to their situation. This exacerbates fears that they may inadvertently fail to comply with the law:

*"I'm a foreigner in a country where it's another language ... And even native English speakers do not understand the regulations very well. So imagine me*



*[doing so]. And then [the donor] also tells me that they cannot allocate money in my budget to a legal person that is going to help me not to make a mistake ... Sometimes I feel that what I'm doing is reckless in a way ... Of course, I'm ... reading tutorials online of how to create a nonprofit ... but at the same time, you feel that those needs are not very well understood ... [I'm] trying to deal with the law in another country, in an area that is so confusing." (Interviewee L)*

*"Ultimately, I found a ... solely [host country-] based accountant ... Those bigger firms like KPMG they will have that branch office in [home country]. And we would like to avoid that ... That's why I have found an accounting firm, which is pretty much localised. And, you can imagine, it is just impossible for a localised firm to really understand what has happened in [home country] and understand the operation of our media because we need to have international payments ... At the same time, there are several things to follow up ... One day, I saw I received a letter from the Intellectual Property Office ... I simply don't know how to handle that." (Interviewee M)*

## Economic Sanctions and their Impact on Registration and Banking

At the time of writing in early 2024, the EU and US have active sanctions against 13 out of 17 home countries included in this study.<sup>2</sup> These sanctions can interfere with the basic operations of media outlets originally from those countries, including registering their outlet and opening a bank account:

*"Because of the sanctions on [home country] we couldn't mention basically anything in the registration that has to do with [there]. And we made it very vague that [what] we're focusing on is culture and training." (Interviewee B)*

Economic sanctions, anti-terrorist laws in host countries, and international banking restrictions such as know-your-customer policies have a significant impact on a media outlet's ability to operate, including limiting an outlet's ability to transfer money to freelancers and staff inside their home country. Stricter banking operations now mean that banks gather more information about the sender and receiver of overseas money transfers, including personal and sensitive data. In other words, banks' de-risking policies can pose enormous risks for exiled journalists (Researcher's field notes, 2024). Media outlets whose home countries are under economic sanctions and anti-terrorist's laws are disproportionately affected by these policies.

Two interviewees explain their struggles to open a bank account and transfer money:

*"We are also struggling to open a bank account here in Germany ... If you are registered in Germany, you must get the residency beforehand. And the banks, not all of them accept to give an account to a nonprofit organisation ... even though you have papers and [are] fully registered and everything. At the same time, we cannot send the money to [home country] ... So we have to ensure that all the freelancers and ... collaborators with us, they have a bank account outside [home country]."* (Interviewee O)

*"If you mention anything on [home country] that's it, you are cancelled ... the registration will be stopped ... we will not be able to do bank transactions, we will not be able to do any sort of work. The other thing is, we don't have a way of transferring funds to [home country] ... We have to go through a loop to avoid all of these complication ... to send funds to [home country] ... I feel that we are treated like terrorists just because like there are some terror groups ... [there]."* (Interviewee B)

Regime controls and surveillance exacerbate the challenge of getting money into country, and the risk of receiving it. Two interviewees explain their struggle:

*"Because of the sanctions there's no legal way of sending funds. Except for in some areas, we can send Western Union, but the exchange rate is rubbish, so it means that you will lose a lot of value. But [in other parts], it's monitored. They know who's receiving, who's sending, and why they are receiving those funds, etc. And because in these parts of the country there isn't even a Western Union or anything like that, you rely completely on local based solutions, which is basically the black market."* (Interviewee B)

*"We are registered outside [the home country] and count as foreign entity. Those who work for us take the risks of having an affiliation with a foreign entity to overthrow the [government]. Because of this, we are not able to send salaries from an account registered in our name to a personal account. These digital footprints will be evidence used against you in case you are being caught, to prove that you take money from a foreign entity."* (Interviewee M)

## Funding Priorities and Attention Waves

Diplomatic imperatives can interfere with donors' and foundations' funding decisions. Two interviewees report that potential donors explained that funding their outlet would not be possible for fear of upsetting relations with the home country government:

*"We're a nonprofit, so all of our funding comes from foundations. And there's two challenges with that. One is that our content is so sensitive in [home country] that a lot of foundations that work [there] in some capacity ... don't want to fund us because it's just too politically sensitive. And they don't want to endanger their other projects [there] ... There are foundations that maybe could or should fund us, but are just a little bit too nervous to do so." (Interviewee T)*

*"European countries wanted to maintain an active dialogue with the authorities in [home country], which effectively means that support for exiled media like ours would undermine the European relationship with them." (Interviewee P)*

Some exiled media outlets feel they should be transparent about their sources of funding as an important part of building trust with their key audience groups. However, some donors do not want their links with particular countries known. This places exiled outlets in an ethical dilemma that is difficult to resolve (Researcher's field notes, 2024).

All 25 interviewees mention that donor priorities shift more regularly than is ideal, creating uncertainty around ongoing media outlet viability and challenges in forward planning. Some describe receiving huge grants over a relatively short period of time, often because the situation in their country was in the international headlines. However, once attention shifts to another crisis or conflict, the funding stream can stop quite abruptly, leaving exiled media in a precarious state:

*"We have this bias that everyone thinks their country is unique ... And this is false because there are no unique countries, they share a lot of problems. But we are humans, and we can't just say like 'right, right' if I'm told: 'Your country's closed. We can't do anything. We will not engage.' But I think it's very important to engage in [home country]." (Interviewee D)*

## Eligibility for Funding

In addition to shifting attention waves, two further challenges come with donors' funding portfolios. Firstly, due to their location, it is hard for exiled media to be geographically eligible



to apply for funding that serves their region. Secondly, if they secure funding, it tends not to account for the increased costs involved in operating from exile. Often, being registered as a European- or US-based NGO but serving an audience outside of those regions can cause confusion and grant eligibility challenges:

*"Our level of funding is designed for a poor country like [home country], but I don't live [there]. My electricity and my rent and my expenses ... are nothing like it would be for a [home country] news organisation." (Interviewee L)*

*"We are registered in [the] UK, having a focus on [home country]. But ... institutional funders, they have their own funding portfolio. If their portfolio is going to fund media in Europe, they will not be funding UK-based media... And for those who have a portfolio to fund media [based in the UK] ... they will not have a portfolio for [home country] because the GDP [gross domestic product] is just too high." (Interviewee M)*

## Dealing with Social Media Platforms

This report has shown that social media platforms are crucial for exiled media operations in two ways. Firstly, all but one outlet profiled in this study rely on these platforms to gather information and distribute content. This is especially important when outlets' websites are blocked by their home country regimes and only accessible through other means, such as virtual private networks (VPNs). Social media platforms can also provide a source of income but this dependency has its downsides.

For example, social media algorithms change with limited warning or recourse. This can have devastating effects on exiled media outlets' audience reach, which is already an accentuated problem for them:

*"In 2016 we were putting a lot of energy to generate more income, more audience. And we were trying to increase the traffic to our website through Facebook. And it was really successful ... 20,000–30,000 visitors a day ... increased to like, 50,000–300,000 a day on our website, and ... when ... something big happened in [home country] even ... a million visitors ... Suddenly, one day after, [our site visits went] down to 10,000. Because Facebook, they changed the algorithm. And ... we were never able to reach back to our previous [audience] number. And then of course, the minute the traffic gone down on the Facebook site, website, then the commercial [revenue] came down." (Interviewee C)*

In addition, algorithms tend to prioritise sensationalism and soft news stories that drive clicks, driving traffic away from news and background reports (Radsch 2023, p.36).

It is difficult enough for independent information to maintain visibility on social media, but this becomes even more challenging when pro-state actors try to manipulate algorithms and divert traffic away from credible media to pro-regime narratives:

*"So, the cyber army [from home country] has always – and will always continue to ... try to trick either moderation or the algorithm, [and] ... block you in some way ... Part of the work we do is, or used to be, social media monitoring ... Pre-Musk, Twitter was actually very good. But ... Musk's policies [now are] that Twitter should abide by the laws of the country where it's based ... So if you're in a country with a dictatorship, they should [block] the accounts of [critical] journalists and the activists [while] amplifying or ... not doing anything to the dictatorship's account ... We also felt that the algorithm was ... diminishing the visibility of [independent media from home country] ... We had a couple of cases of the cyber army ... [creating] fake profiles of young girls who are pro-dictatorship. Before ... the owner of the profile would report it, and the account was taken down, [but it's] not like that any more ... And the troll accounts are not taken down." (Interviewee L)*

*"The number of [home country] government-sponsored or para-government YouTube, paid channels, it's countless. The whole idea is to saturate because it makes it hard getting [independent] information ... [Their content is] written in a way [to] make it so hard, as a reader, which one to choose, you know. They're constantly online ... producing content. Most of it is hate mongering." (Interviewee V)*

Content moderation on social media platforms causes problems for many exiled media outlets, as their content often covers sensitive issues, like human right violations or violent conflict. This can mean that their posts are removed and/or their accounts are blocked as they breach bluntly applied community standards or rules around issues such as graphic imagery, corruption, disinformation and terrorism. Content moderation systems can end up censoring coverage of important issues, causing additional obstacles for exiled media outlets that are trying to avoid repression and censorship from their home countries (Radsch, 2023, p. 50). This results in losing audiences and digital advertising revenue, and the additional burden of working to get content moderation or account blocking decisions reversed:

*"YouTube [is always] checking your copyright issue, your violation of community standards. And we are doing news about [home country], which involves ... conflict ... So they say, 'Oh, you're violating our community standard.' They've removed our channel for two weeks ... It's a huge setback because we get the income from YouTube ... And then when you start again after two weeks, but you have to get the audience back, it's not that easy." (Interviewee C)*

Many media outlets report that they often receive no explanation for why their account is suspended or content removed. It can take months to get a response or reactivate an account. This unresponsiveness is reported in Internews' URGENT research (Radsch 2023) and its Safety at Stake report (Internews, 2023). The latter covers Meta's Trusted Partners Program, revealing that organisations often wait weeks or months for a response to issues they have flagged, even on issues relating to a risk of imminent harm. Response rates were shown to be swifter for Meta's partners in Ukraine than for those in Ethiopia, Yemen or Myanmar, prompting speculation that some countries are prioritised over others.

Evidence from interviews in this study point in a similar direction. One interviewee based in Europe has a Meta contact they can reach out to, enabling them to reverse content removal where that is warranted. However, two study participants based outside Europe feel they have no support or response from within Meta when they are erroneously targeted by the content moderation system.

One outlet founded and registered outside Europe stopped the process of verifying its Facebook account due to safety concerns:

*"We could not verify ourselves with Facebook, they asked us a lot of questions... Why all these questions... like, 'can we be vouched by an international media?' And 'will the funding by [donor] continue?' ... I will not put my name in a water bill or electricity bill ... this is part of my security arrangement. [Facebook] want water bill, electricity bill in [our] name ... I know that they have their own algorithms ... and they have other safety and security regulations within the EU ... and the US. But I think there should be a situation where we can verify in a different way." (Interviewee AA)*



## 4.3 Outlet-Level Challenges

This section groups outlet-level challenges faced by exiled media outlets into four thematic areas:

1. Editorial, including working with sources and verification of information from afar.
2. Physical safety, transnational repression, digital security of operation and staff, staff burnout and risks to audiences.
3. Understanding and meeting audiences' information needs, ensuring information reaches audiences and measuring the impact of content.
4. Revenue diversification amid a dependence from short-term, project-based donor funding.

While these challenges can be severe obstacles to organisational sustainability, exiled media outlets have found creative and innovative ways to deal with them. Examples of these practical strategies are highlighted in the boxes in this section.

### Editorial

Exiled media outlets typically operate distributed newsrooms, with staff and stringers based in multiple locations, often far away from the story. This presents a host of challenges to newsgathering.

#### **Working With Sources and Verifying Information**

Finding stories, verifying information, accessing sources and sifting through mis- and disinformation are a particular challenge for exiled media outlets, particularly those which are fully remote. A combination of distance and highly restrictive conditions at home make it difficult to remain informed about what is happening, and every outlet needs to vet and cultivate sources on the ground. Media outlets tend to rely on networks of well-connected and informed journalists, stringers and freelancers that take years to develop and establish mutual trust with, and must be governed by extensive security protocols. They also receive information from relatives, friends and contacts who remain in the home country, relying on WhatsApp, Snapchat or mobile communication, or word of mouth for news and information. Many such sources take incredible risks and wish to remain anonymous, so their information must be substantiated. Open-source intelligence can supplement here. Obtaining any information can be disrupted by communication technology challenges, including deliberate internet shutdowns and blocking of social media channels:

*"Right now, we have journalists scattered all over. Even if the journalists are based within [home country] ... in safe areas, they tend to suffer from internet shutdown, making it very hard for us to communicate and reach out to them ... We are struggling to get access to the information and sometimes we rely on institutions and trusted sources ... that provide us with the ideas and information that we cannot have access to otherwise." (Interviewee A)*

In some cases, the interviewees state they do not know where a story comes from and cannot investigate that in case this poses further risk to the source. Exiled media outlets are often unable to name their sources, which can affect efforts to build all-important trust with audiences:

*"We receive a lot of tips, but journalistically that's a bit dodgy because... what's your protocol for verifying and checking facts?" (Interviewee I)*

*"I don't even know how I'm gonna put it. I know, for example, that we produced a note on an [event within home country] but I don't know how we got those photos." (Interviewee H)*

## Practical Strategies: **Triangulating Information**

One media outlet describes how it tries to include as many sources as possible for each story, even if that means the story takes longer to be published. It also uses openly available sources to triangulate information, for example by checking what other independent media outlets report on an issue, and information published by civil society organisations (CSOs) and NGOs that are active in the home country:

*"[Formally,] we don't have ... someone who's paid in the [home] country. But people collect information informally ... We're thinking how we can formalise that ... compensate people for producing some information or sharing work... [if] we were able to take care of that safety issue because ... even the association with ourselves might create a problem for them ...*

*So how do you go around that? ... Informally, especially with our newsroom head connections ... And sometimes ... I might get some information, let's say from a village, let's say the government has been ... taking people by force. And, if you happen to call home, they will tell you ... 'They're coming and taking the kids away' ... And... you tried to confirm, calling more people in the village ... We've actually [got] ... many layers of verifying information, you just don't settle for ... one or two [sources] ... We're not here to break the news. We're here to provide verified information ... It's not again formalised because of the safety of sources." (Interviewee V)*



One interviewee mentions how important it is for them to share information and instill audience engagement as a way to gather new information:

*"We have this model where we originate or uncover something, and it's fine for other people to use it and spread it, because our interest is that the public interest information is spread as much as possible ... And, generally, bringing fans to social media, the importance of that dialogue with people [is] the feedback and of course, the leads that you may get ... We used to do a lot of crowdsourcing of information on Twitter." (Interviewee L)*

## Staffing Challenges

The conditions for journalism in the home countries of many exiled media outlets have been in a dire state for years, with some experiencing conflict as well as prolonged and accelerating attacks on – and undermining of – press freedom.

This has two consequences for journalism in general, and for exiled media operations specifically. On the one hand, there are few or no opportunities for journalists to train and build experiences inside their home country. So there may be a dearth of the necessary skills and experience to produce high-quality reporting. Given the intimidation and repression they face in their home country, many may also be too afraid to work as journalists:

*"There isn't an ethical standard of journalism or professional standards in [home country]." (Interviewee I)*

*"They call themselves journalists [and] they'll get there with some training or whatever. But I think ... journalists who used to work as journalists while in [home country] ... many of them are just amateurs." (Interviewee V)*

*"Not that many people – or even no one – wants to be a reporter or journalist any more, or they don't know how to be one." (Interviewee N)*

In addition, experienced journalists leaving the home country can lead to brain drain and hinder the transfer of skills to peers or early career journalists:

*"A lot of media people they went abroad and it's like a gap between the ones in [the home] country – a younger generation of journalists – and the people who can share experience and information." (Interviewee N)*

These two factors make it immensely difficult for exiled media outlets to find skilled and experienced staff. Some offer training and mentoring to staff to overcome this:



*"I feel very energised, very active, because I'm sharing my experiences with the young people, and they are getting better at the job, they are smart. It's not just passing on the trauma, the awareness of what happened and what is happening ... We need to stay alive and keep fighting. Have hope that there will be a better day. Next year, there will be a better year. This is what keeps us going."*

(Interviewee U)

Even where they can offer training and development, exiled media experience high staff turnover. Due to a lack of resources, and the unpredictability of funding, media outlets struggle to pay a salary that can compete with market rates or reflect the level of personal risk involved in the job. This means that many staff are obliged to work part time or even in a voluntary capacity. Media outlets rarely offer pay raises, promotions, career development or other benefits that would make them attractive employers. Some staff even leave to work for state-owned media outlets as they pay more and because it is safer to work for regime-aligned media outlets. This feels especially frustrating after an exiled media outlet has invested in their skills development — and risky when sensitive information has been shared with employees:

*"We start to train some people, develop their skills to work with us. And then we are going through the cycle of losing these people, losing the skills, and then we are hiring another team ... like unlimited cycles."* (Interviewee Y)

*"Money rules. [The home country regime] has money and they want to attract ... journalists ... [who] will work under their wings, and they won't be independent, which is basically ... bringing outlets like us back to square zero, and we are back to not having ... independent journalism."* (Interviewee B)

Another challenge linked to a lack of resources and staff is the fact that staff at many exiled media outlets need to perform a number of different roles. Interviewees report undertaking administrative work, proposal writing and reporting to donors, while also working as editors and/or journalists. This is not uncommon for small local media outlets anywhere, but is especially problematic for exiled media outlets given the additional complexity of their operating model and reporting processes.

Interviewees feel this multitasking negatively affects the quality of their core work and also takes a toll on their mental state:

*"I'm struggling ... You need to have the capacity to report, and to write, to edit; and we are a small organisation of five people ... I can't check all the boxes that*

*in other organisations are done by 50 people. We are passionate, but [even] passionate people need enough time to complete all of our tasks.”* (Interviewee D)

*“Today, I’m working in a double role where I lead on administrative stuff in the [home country] but I also work on reporting and interviewing as a journalist. That is due to the under staff[ing].”* (Interviewee A)

## Practical Strategies: **Operational “Buffer Zones”**

For some exiled media outlets, especially small ones with only a handful of staff, there is no other option than for staff to hold multiple roles. Of course, journalism, administration and fundraising are different skillsets, and some interviewees mention that grant writing training provided by donors has helped them to use their limited time more efficiently and effectively.

However, other outlets manage to keep editorial, administrative and grant writing or fundraising roles separate. They say this organisational structure must be baked in from the beginning for an organisation to grow sustainably:

*“If you don’t have people dedicated ... to improving and running the administration, you are not going to be able to develop and improve your fundraising capabilities. It’s the same thing on the editorial side, you’re not going to be able to move forward editorially, and you kind of get stuck producing the same content over and over again.”* (Interviewee J)

Two interviewees note that keeping fundraising and editorial roles separate provides a ‘buffer zone’ between perceived or real donor influence, and editorial agendas and decision-making.

## Physical Safety, Digital Security and Risks to Exiled Media Outlets’ Audiences

Being in exile does not necessarily mean being safe, and exiled media outlets and personnel are often still targeted by physical threats and digital security issues. In turn, these circumstances and the challenges of their work can affect journalists’ mental health.

While some of these challenges affect any business – digital security is relevant to any organisation with an online presence and digitalised processes – they exert a disproportionate level of pressure on exiled media outlets, who find them more difficult to address, and who also have more at stake. Exiled media outlets must consider safety and security issues in relation

to their operational infrastructure, their staff and those close to them, and their audiences.

## Physical Safety

On an individual level, many journalists have been working under constant fear of arrest in their home country, with detainment and even imprisonment common. Some experienced torture or are aware that this happens to people like them in custody. One interviewee has a colleague who was stripped of their nationality. Some interviewees have been charged in absentia, have arrest warrants out against them and cannot return to their home country without risk of arrest on arrival.

For some, threats to their physical safety continue even in exile:

*"Many of us, including myself, including [our] co-founders ... is wanted, and we can be killed ... In [home country] we are charged with two, three charges which basically can send anyone who is working for [us] to life in prison ... There is no safe place, only a safer [place] ... in this kind of situation"* (Interviewee U)

Safety for staff, stringers and freelancers still working in the home country is a particular concern for many exiled media outlets. Nearly all must work undercover in order to protect their identity and obscure any connection with the outlet they work for, which makes it particularly difficult for those outlets to check on their wellbeing.

Some interviewees are exhausted by a constant cat-and-mouse game with state authorities:

*"The government representative] ... sometimes, if he's in good mood, he talks to us. Sometimes, if he's not in good mood, he threatens us or says, 'I know where you are, I will get you.'" (Interviewee AA)*

Friends and family at home can also become targets for intimidation. They may receive messages to pass on to exiled journalists, or find themselves interrogated about the journalist's whereabouts and activities.

Furthermore, several exiled media outlets have been defamed as foreign actors trying to impose an external political agenda, or terrorist organisations. Two outlets participating in this study had their home country operating licence and registration revoked. Renewing their licence in person, as required, would be unsafe. Seeking registration overseas is an important part of risk and continuity planning.

## Practical Strategies: **Registration to Operate in Exile**

Registering to operate in a host country is a crucial part of complying with a host country's regulations and being eligible for donor funding. Moreover, registration in exile plays an important role in organisational continuity when a media outlet is under threat by the home country regime and risks having their operating licence revoked:

*"We got many threats from governmental bodies and also militias ... in [home country] ... We couldn't renew our registration there because [data would be shared with] the internal security agency. They are aware of our activities, the founders and everything. So it felt a bit risky to send any one of our team members to go and to renew the papers ... We cannot do it remotely. So we have [to send] someone ... there physically to renew the papers ... Thankfully, we are registered in [host country]." (Interviewee O).*

### **Digital Security**

Given the importance of their online content distribution and working from afar, digital security is particularly important for exiled media outlets and needs constant attention.

Three interviewees reported having experienced cyber attacks that brought down their websites, they suspect with the complicity of the home country regime. Seven interviewees say their website is blocked in their home country, while two report that their home country experiences regular internet shutdowns. Five interviewees suspect that their home country government or state-aligned actors had hacked their outlet's social media accounts. And two allege that authorities impersonate their social media profiles and publish content in support of the regime:

*"We had fake Facebook pages coming up with our name — maybe a slight change, but everything looks the same. They copy and paste all our articles ... on the Facebook page. And then they put one propaganda story in between, pretending this is coming from us." (Interviewee C)*

Individual exiled journalists also experience online abuse and harassment. One interviewee explains how two colleagues were swamped with online abuse after publishing a piece critical of the home country government.

*"We made a video, and had a series on [topic], and we created videos on TikTok, and had a lot of engagement and attention, and the two creators received a lot of violence and harassment in [home country]. We had ... to make ... a public statement, and to check all our security protocols ... The creator and ... producer*



*... had a really hard time [for] 2–3 weeks ... It is not the regime ... directly, but a lot of trolls and people that we know ... work for the government. There's a lot of small digital media that ... the government gave them money to harass." (Interviewee X)*

## **Risks to Exiled Media Outlets' Audiences**

Exiled media outlets do not just have to deal with physical safety and digital security issues affecting them directly, but also with knowing that, in some instances, engaging with information from independent media sources can pose a risk to their audience. In some cases, audiences are discouraged or prevented from accessing independent media content as authorities block their websites. In others, authorities may appear to turn a blind eye to what people listen to on the radio or watch on TV, but their behaviour is unreliable and so accessing independent media still carries perceived risk. Even where accessing independent media might be considered moderately safe, contacting an exiled media outlet, or sharing, commenting on or liking their content online is often seen as unwise. This makes it difficult for exiled media outlets to get feedback or input from audiences.

In the most extreme cases, audiences believe that accessing exiled media content involves huge personal risk:

*"Literally anybody can take you and detain you, and no one will be held accountable ... I think that's what [the audience is] assuming ... Anything that's outside of the government control is considered opposition or anti-nationalist, anti-patriotic, treasonous, a sellout ... So ... people are scared to be in any way, form or shape associated with [us]. The fear is they might be detained and they might not see the light of day again ... [or] something worse might happen to them ... I think on our end, there is no risk because we are in the safety of Western countries ... But again, our policy is 'do no harm' to our informants or whoever, even family, friends." (Interviewee V)*

Two interviewees report how, in their home country, ordinary people are being stopped on the streets by military groups, who are confiscating people's phones or scanning through them to check what media they consume.

These pressures of potentially putting their audience members at risk, on top of pre-existing trauma and ongoing threats to their own safety, have severe consequences for the psycho-social wellbeing of many journalists working in exile:



*"Our staff experience all sort of anxieties. When we are together, it's OK. We have this commitment — we want to do our work in whatever situation we are, wherever we are. I think this is what makes us [tick], and is why we are still alive."*

(Interviewee U)

These safety risks, and the barriers to audiences accessing media content, bring another set of challenges — how exiled media outlets can get to know their audience, engage with them, and meet their information needs.

## Practical Strategies: **Keeping Audiences in the Home Country Safe**

Most media outlets say that they may communicate with their audiences via comments on social media platforms or WhatsApp groups. One interviewee explains that one audience member used code words to evade suspected surveillance. Another explains the different perspectives of home and diaspora audiences:

*"Inside [the home country], the audience that reads us are people who are very well-informed about the situation of censorship and surveillance. And so they have the technology to get around that safely — the VPN and other methods. And those people don't directly contact us as much. It's more the diaspora [who do that], and there's not much risk to them because they're outside the country." (Interviewee T)*

## Audiences' Information Needs

The exiled media outlets included in this study view their mission as being an independent voice serving people in their home country. However, understanding the interests and information needs of these key audience groups, and knowing whether their work is impactful, are particular challenges for exiled media outlets.

### **Understanding and Engaging With Different Audience Groups**

Exiled media outlets primarily serve a home audience, but the diaspora can also be an important audience — and even a modest source of revenue. This is particularly the case if media in their host country isn't acknowledging or providing for them. Setting an editorial direction and developing products that meets the needs of both groups is challenging, but can also help build bridges between them.

Some interviewees say that their audience at home want accountability journalism and



documentation of human rights abuses, as well as lighter content to provide respite. Other interviewees say that audiences see any divergence from hard news as a frivolity that is out of keeping with the country's current situation. The diaspora audience, on the other hand, may have different concerns, including wanting to understand how developments in their home country will affect their lives outside, including migration issues.

## Practical Strategies: **Creative Ways to Engage With Audiences**

Government restrictions and the distance between outlets in exile and their home audience demands innovative approaches to learning about audience's needs and interests.

Some exiled media outlets use encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and WhatsApp to elicit audience feedback, while others run regular surveys through platforms like SurveyMonkey. However, as one interviewee stresses, online channels may require a level of access to or familiarity with technology that not all audience members have.

One interviewee increased audience engagement and ultimately built a membership programme by hiring a dedicated staff member to work on this:

*"Last year we won a contest with Google News Initiatives and one component was the service of an audience and engagement officer. They conducted some surveys with our most loyal readers ... in-depth interviews to find out what they think about us. But then also with the wider public ... 'What do you think of [us]? What would you like to read? What do you think we lack?' It has resulted in actual products. There was an event happening within [home country], and we conducted interviews to find out what people want to learn about this even ... This resulted in a webinar with one of our journalists and invited experts, and a big part of our audience attended ... With this support, we were able to run this monthly or every second month. It has been ... useful to get our audience to commit, to donate or to form part of a membership programme." (Interviewee H)*

## Practical Strategies:

### **Reaching New Audience Segments and Meeting Audiences' Needs**

Media outlets must distribute content in formats that reflect their audiences' levels of access to, and familiarity with, technology. Many interviewees cite having had success using email **newsletters**, which have the benefit of yielding subscriptions lists, while others distribute pdf weekly summaries.

One website has produced audio content to reach audiences with low literacy levels:



*"We produced a story about women in a rural community, but these women cannot read. So, instead of online content, we collaborated with a radio station to produce podcasts, which was a successful way to reach them."*

This outlet also **co-produces content with their audience** to ensure it is meaningful and relevant to them, and to enhance trust:

*"We are trying to co-produce content with our audiences ... When we produce something about a population in risk or in vulnerable situations, like ... women or people of diversity, transgender people, for example. When we make content about these people, we always try to share the content before we publish it. And we have a conversation with them and confirm that they feel how they are represented is right."*

*Sometimes it works very well, sometimes less [so], because they suddenly change things... Some say this interferes with journalism ... it's against the journalist's methods, allowing your audience to see and read and give an opinion ... Of course I want our audience to have an opinion, and I want that they see themselves represented in our content. It's very important we have this kind of conversation with people who give us their stories and history and experience." (Interviewee X)*

## **Measuring the Reach and Impact of Media Content**

Many exiled media outlets have incomplete or inaccurate audience reach data because of VPN use and the absence of media market data in their home countries. They are also largely unable to observe their primary (home country) audiences interacting with their content because of their physical distance from these audiences.

Consequently, exiled media outlets may rely heavily on informal evidence to understand the reach and impact of their content:

*"We wanted to find a way to have an alternative for people when the powers are off so they are able to use battery-operated ... shortwave radio ... [This] has been one of the biggest challenges ... because there is no organised or systematic way of gauging how many people are tuning in, and which programmes are their favourite ... like ... a very systematic research or survey ... So the impact is very anecdotal... People who visited the [home] country ... come to us, and ... friends and family members ... tell you that they watch that ... Again, this is anecdotal, we can't really put it in numbers ... We're not able to really collate [our] impact, even though we know that people are following [our content]."* (Interviewee V)

## Practical Strategies: **Measuring Impact Beyond Clicks**

One interviewee explains her pitch to donors about the value and impact of her media outlet as an independent, unbiased voice that counters state propaganda and misinformation, which goes beyond its audience reach:

*"You have to measure the value of journalism not in clicks or circulation, but the real-world impact. The social and the real world good that we are going to bring can be huge. That's the pitch we try to do with donors. I understand we are not producing 10 new reports a day ... The point is that we are trying to do [the] kind of very slow production that is going to be worth it at some point, even if we don't see ... immediate results." (Interviewee L)*

There are alternative ways to measure impact beyond the quantity of reports or reach, and interviewees state that donors are increasingly willing to find them. These include:

- Awareness raised about certain topics/issues
- Policy change, and changes to laws and regulations
- Increased awareness of the media outlet's brand

## Revenue

Despite attempts to generate income from commercial activities and audience revenue, all exiled media outlets featured in this study depend to some extent on donor funding.

### **Transitioning From Donor Dependence**

Trying to adapt their organisations to be able to run without donor support causes headaches for many interviewees:

*"If you are not-for-profit, you are most likely not [financially] viable ... You need foundational support ... You try to report factual information which is very different from your government's narrative. Then you are dealing with a population that will not pay ... for that ... So we are just trapped in between. You do this for your country, the society, through independent, factual, truthful reporting. But then who is going to pay for it? Definitely not your government. I am asked by donors: 'Are you viable?' Try not to ask that. I do not think this is achievable in the near future." (Interviewee D)*

*"Media always costs more than [donors] think it's going to cost, and there's a neoliberal kind of thing that it's all got to be a self-sustaining, profit-making enterprise ... The idea of media as a public good is not accepted, but it should*



be, especially given the situation we have now with misinformation and social media and disinformation. The donor keeps cutting its money, saying 'You should be more sustainable'... whereas the situation now is the budget for this organisation is less than the donor's HQ office." (Interviewee I)

Many media outlets feel overwhelmed by increased pressure to find sustainable business models that may not exist. A small number have some success here, but they are not typical.

## Practical Strategies: **Shifting to a Business Mindset**

One interviewee explains how a donor helped them to develop a business mindset and entrepreneurial approach:

*"[Other exiled media outlets] just set up an NGO because it's easier. But this is sort of a business sector. It's not a development corporation, initiative, in any circumstance. It should just be, like in the UK... the US or in France, a sort of self-sustaining business. And this is... exactly why [exiled media outlets] suffer, because as soon as they leave the country, their mindset is just like, 'I worry about my advertisers.' And that whole funding basis, overnight, just falls apart.*

*... We did not have a business mindset... It was just, this is how this works... But in terms of scalability, this... is incredibly important, even in an exiled environment.*

*A long time ago, a colleague wrote a report on the 57 ways of making money from a media outlet, and 25 ways don't apply to exiled media, because of the distance, etc. ... A mindset shift... started changing things for us. [A consultant] started working with us... He came over for a week to set up advertising, which we didn't have... Some other outlets from [home country] did, but just... old school. You... reserved space for a month and it was fixed on the website. But... rotating banner ads can fill up the gaps with Google ads, all of that completely unknown to the [home country media sector].*

*So we send out emails to other exiled outlets from [home country], asking [for] their CPM [cost per mile] but... nobody understood... [Since 2016] we have gradually grown our economic income to the point where it's now 6 percent of our annual turnover — still fairly small, but this is free spending money. It's incredibly useful for your organisation. It is also sort of a buffer towards you donor, where if you get a lot of topic[-specific] funding... you [also] have this free money to cover more topics... And we can publish with this money what we want... whether the donor likes it or not." (Interviewee P)*

Interviewees say that the grant funding models that donors may wish to wean partners off do not provide sufficient flexibility, stability or space for them to think beyond survival:



*"How do I aim for a strategic vision for 2025, which is around the corner, without knowing if I will have funding for that year?" (Interviewee H)*

Donor funding tends to be short-term and tied to specific projects, leaving media outlets in an endless cycle of donor dependency that is difficult to break (Cook, 2016):

*"It would be wonderful if we could hire a full-time person to work on grants. But a lot of our funding specifically does not fund fundraising. At the same time, [donors] want us to become self-sufficient, and they don't want to provide us funding that we can use to become self-sufficient. We also don't have the tools to become fully self-sufficient, because we don't have [the] infrastructure for raising funds more independently. And so that's kind of a catch-22 ... they want us to do other fundraising besides from them, but ... don't give us the means to do that." (Interviewee T)*

This financial insecurity comes on top of the personal trauma that staff at exiled media outlets often experience:

*"For example, last year, we had only staff contracts for one month because we didn't have donors until April ... And then [we] have all this added challenge of insecurity, added trauma ... We all had all sorts of trauma ... So these are very serious challenges." (Interviewee U)*

Many within the media support sector believe that many markets simply will not support independent media, with public funding the only option (Myers and Gilberds 2024). One interviewee describes this reliance on donors as an "awkward tango between donor and exiled media. When they tumble, we tumble as well" (Interviewee D).

Donors may have very clear expectations about what subjects and activities should be funded, and largely wish to prioritise the home country audience. This may leave exiled media outlets with limited editorial or operational freedom, meaning they cannot react quickly as new risks and threats materialise or editorial priorities shift.

## **Diversifying Revenue**

This may also limit exiled media outlets' opportunities to find new sources of revenue. For example, diaspora communities may be in a better position to pay for content yet not may be the priority audiences as far as donors are concerned, or provide the desired audience reach:



*"Maybe ... the most difficult point in that relation with donors [is] how to match ... your needs and their priority ... Most of the donors from Western countries, so sometimes we are stuck between the real needs of the region ... because we are covering the needs of the community, and [the donor's] ... view of [those] needs ... Maybe some ... specialists ... experts from the region [could] explain the real needs and ... circumstances of the region [to donors]." (Interviewee Y)*

Furthermore, the advertising market in the home country may be directly or indirectly controlled by the regime or regime-aligned actors, placing that revenue off limits for independent media:

*"No company wants to advertise [with us]it's very hard to generate [advertising revenue], and then also [having a] reputation of being exiled and being involved in politics, being a hardcore news channel... Many companies... support us, but they don't want to be seen with you." (Interviewee C)*

## Practical Strategies: **Creative Ways of Diversifying Revenue Streams**

The following three case studies demonstrate how exiled media outlets have applied and combined different revenue streams, and what their experiences have taught them.

1. One outlet that is planning to leave its home country and is already registered in another country explains how it set itself up for the future:

*"Grants are the main source of income for us. But we have a business model, and we sell ... strategic communication services, like consultancies about gender and diversity and communication. And we make campaign content ... We are starting with advertisements. But, overall, we make around 30 percent of our budget from things like this. We do not use the money, we save it and we only use the grants. In that way, we are preparing for the future. We are currently also developing a business model ... to monetise content with our audience. Our audience is in the home country as well as diaspora ... We ... have to think about a business model that applies in different contexts." (Interviewee X)*

2. A media outlet that was founded in exile then moved into the home country but had to return into exile explains a creative way to generate revenue from an alternative to traditional advertising:

*"In the beginning, we had 10–15 percent of revenue from commercial income and 75–80 percent from donor funding ... In 2020, we had about 50 percent of our own income, and 50 percent from ... funding. And our projection was 60:40 in 2021 ... We aim to be totally independent by 2025. I think it's really achievable.*

*We work with UN agencies ... large NGOs but also small ones, and CSOs. We*



*get contracted to produce a series of programmes related [to], for example, migrant workers. But advertising is difficult, even when we were inside [the home country]. There are a couple of TV channels who occupy 80 percent of the whole advertising market, and they are well connected to the regime. They have millions of dollars, there is no way for us to compete ... We are still in the cycle of donor funding ...*

*So we ... produce a public service announcement, like a TV commercial, [for an NGO] and charge production fees ... Also research groups, think tanks — they produce new research, have a press conference, and [a] research report, and we can put that press conference on TV, and turn the research paper into a series. And that has become quite a bit of our revenue.” (Interviewee O)*

### 3. An interviewee from a media outlet founded in exile describes the various ways they generate alternative income:

*“We do advertising for human rights documentation, organisations that want to promote ... the work that they do. And we were able to do that back in 2016, where we were basically the only one who could offer detailed targeting. So even the mobile website ... when somebody comes to me and says [we] have an Android and an iOS app, then we can have two sets of banners ... So it's ... sort of blow[ing] your own trumpet because we haven't been able to do audience monetisation ...*

*[I have] friends who have been extremely successful in rallying the diaspora behind, basically saying, 'We are targeting you because we need your help to help your fellow countrymen back in the home country.' This membership model is something that we are ... eager to explore ... We also offer translation services and consultations, and do tech development, like 'tech for good' apps that help access our content safely for the audience.” (Interviewee P)*

## Organisational Sustainability

The data suggests that sustainability for exiled media outlets may not mean financial independence, but rather continuing to exist and provide information to communities in their home country. Sustainability for exiled media outlets is also about innovation, resilience and agility.

Many interviewees suggest defining organisational sustainability in a multi-dimensional way:

*“As an exiled media, people are already traumatised ... So, you need to have a conducive environment ... good equipment ... a good studio ... a good structure. And this has been reflected in our output — [over] the last four years, we have really become better ...*

*For me, sustainability starts with the people, and then the organisation and then the product, then the fans will come automatically because it is a need. And then*





*we have a name. And we have a donor who likes to fill the information gap ...*

*And sustainability is [a] process – you never know how things [will] develop, because of the geopolitics, what's gonna happen in [home country], in [host country], or the donor may change the person responsible ... or the embassy can change ... You have to be adaptable and flexible ... this is very important while you are an exiled media." (Interviewee AA)*



# 5. Conclusion & Recommendations

Exiled media outlets are not a homogeneous group. They take myriad forms in pursuit of their mission as an independent voice serving their home country and diaspora audiences. They are integrated into a complex system that imposes challenges at both structural level and outlet levels. Both media development actors and exiled media outlets have different degrees of agency to overcome these challenges.

This study aimed to make the experiences and support needs of exiled media outlets more visible, specifically focusing on outlets operating out of the current international spotlight. It aimed to answer the overarching research question: *How can the media development community support exiled media outlets to survive and continue their work?*

There is no immediate solution to ensuring the sustainability of exiled media outlets given the complex issues that they face. The answer to the research question is rooted in the fact that exiled media outlets experience various realities and constraints, requiring tailored support.

Nevertheless, this report has highlighted several common challenges, various entry points for action, and opportunities to build on practical strategies that exiled media outlets are already implementing. These inform a set of recommendations, set out below, that could underpin the coherent and ambitious strategy to support exiled media that is so urgently needed. In doing so, we wish to underscore the point that exiled media know the challenges they face and are the best guides to overcoming these challenges. The international community can play an important role in supporting the development of networks where exiled media can share best practice, find community and act in solidarity with one another:

## Recommendations for Donors and Media Support Implementers:

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- **DUE DILIGENCE:** Identify and support only those exiled media outlets which demonstrate a clear commitment to providing balanced, impartial information and serving the needs of target audiences. This may be evidenced in their mission, code of ethics, editorial strategy, their ownership structure and their output.
  - **PREPAREDNESS:** Remain alert to the signs that pressure is building in a given country.
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Support outlets to consider different measures for sustaining their services. The appropriate steps will depend on the outlet and the context in which they operate, but may include exploring options to soften editorial stance, developing an emergency plan, ensuring journalists and their dependents have valid passports and other personal documents to hand, offshoring data and archives, bolstering digital and physical security and ensuring admin rights for social media accounts and other key responsibilities are distributed. In addition, provide support for outlets to determine the best alternative location to seek registration and open bank accounts should they need to move some or all of their operations.

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- **LEGAL SUPPORT:** Increase the availability of legal support which reflects the unique complexity of running a hybrid outlet spanning multiple legal and regulatory environments, including those which are volatile or hostile to independent media. Outlets need to register appropriately – whether as a non-profit, for-profit, or both – and remain compliant with tax, HR and media law in their host country. In addition, they may simultaneously face legal threats and an increasingly challenging legal environment for their reporting networks at home. Hence this will be an ongoing need not easily served from a single source.
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- **PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT:** Build in opportunities for exiled journalists to access psychosocial support wherever it is possible.
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- **HOLISTIC SECURITY AUDIT AND ONGOING HELPDESK SUPPORT:** Support an extensive, holistic security audit spanning physical, digital and legal dimensions of the outlet's risk profile. Identify digital security audits designed specifically for low-resource organisations as these highlight pragmatic, cost-effective steps to creating a more digitally secure environment. These may include the redevelopment of websites to fix vulnerabilities or enable the safe uploading of content or sharing of information from contributors and sources in country. Improved safety and security can build confidence and the ability to take greater risks around reporting. Partner this with ongoing digital security help desk support.
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- **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Provide ongoing support to professional and organisational development which is tailored to the specific needs of each organisation and includes peer-to-peer elements where exiled outlets can learn from one another. Topics will evolve as new threats and opportunities emerge, but may include development and use of circumvention technologies, disinformation detection and investigation, the production and monetisation of highly shareable content in new formats and for multiple distribution channels and platforms, leveraging AI, marketing, digital analytics and audience research in closed environments.

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- **UNDERSTANDING AUDIENCES AND IMPACT:** Support outlets to maximise their use of digital analytics tools, and develop alternative approaches such as surveys to understanding their audience needs, preferences and technical know-how, reach and impact where data is incomplete. Remain flexible around definitions of impact where reach is hard to measure and where typical methods for impact evaluation are not feasible.
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- **ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND OPERATING MODEL:** Focus from the outset on developing the appropriate organisational structure and operating model to deliver information in-country, but recognise the need for flexibility, patience and constant adaptation as the structure will need to evolve. Challenges may include managing a distributed newsroom with staff on different types of contracts in multiple locations; the constant redevelopment of skills and workflows to new distribution channels and alternative mechanisms to receive donor funding whilst registration is pending.
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- **DONOR FUNDING:** Exiled media have higher risk profiles, need extensive security and undertake complex reporting processes. This results in higher operating costs. Acknowledge the reality that donor funding must remain part of the revenue strategy for most such outlets, and that it would ideally be flexible in order to respond to emergencies without bureaucratic delays, and allow members of the team to undertake strategy development, fundraising, donor engagement and reporting without distracting from the organisation's core mission to report on and for their country of origin. Pressure to develop alternative revenue streams may be unrealistic and can result in perverse incentives — for example, a disproportionate focus on diaspora audiences at the expense of audiences at home. By the same token, a too rigid focus by donors on specific audiences or reach targets may have the opposite effect — outlets avoid diaspora audiences who may need their products and be a source of audience revenue because they are too small in number or not deemed a donor priority.
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- **SAFE SPACES TO CONVENE:** Recognise the particular challenge in distributed operations in which staff are inevitably disconnected and may experience different levels of personal risk from one another. Enable the creation of safe spaces where they can come together in person to bond, work on organisational strategy and receive much-needed psychosocial support.
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- **OVERCOMING DIGITAL CENSORSHIP:** Help outlets prepare for telecommunications challenges including internet shutdowns, throttling and blocking. Support them to create 'content-side' circumvention tools that enable audiences to access content without having

to set up VPNs, to produce research into how in-country audiences prefer to engage with independent media to design products, services and distribution strategies around those preferences and to hire staff to produce content for platforms that are more difficult to censor, such as YouTube, Telegram and audio (podcasts or SMS short-codes).

- **NETWORKING:** Support existing networks emerging organically from the exiled media community so that exiled media can share solutions with one another and instigate those networks where they don't exist. Create opportunities for donor engagement.
- **PLATFORM ENGAGEMENT:** Support avenues for exiled media to engage in collective advocacy efforts with platform companies as these companies influence the visibility of independent, credible and trusted content.

## Recommendations for Governments:

- **SAFE REFUGE:** Increase the number of specialist, long terms visas for journalists in exile and develop coordinated processes for supporting journalists leaving their home country, including guidance on appropriate choice of destination. This support needs to include evacuation, transit, immigration and asylum processes, as well as domestic programmes to allow them to continue working, support language immersion and fellowships that include members of their families.
- **REGISTRATION:** Consider the development of a distinct category of registration for exiled media that enables them to access funding regardless of domestic status.
- **TRANSNATIONAL HARASSMENT:** Protect exiled journalists by raising awareness of transnational threats at host country government and law enforcement levels, understanding the prevalence of this harassment, identifying offender regimes/groups, and providing enhanced security and refugee status where possible.
- **LEGISLATION:** Promote a domestic and global legal and regulatory environment which supports and protects freedom of expression and information and a free and open internet.



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## Endnotes

- 1 Defined in this report as media outlets that operate either partly or fully outside the country in which their audience is based.
- 2 Source: EU Sanctions Map and Sanctions Programs and Country Information | Office of Foreign Assets Control (treasury.gov)



## ABOUT INTERNEWS

Internews is a nonprofit that supports independent media in 100+ countries — from radio stations in refugee camps, to hyper-local news outlets, to filmmakers and technologists. Internews trains journalists and digital rights activists, tackles disinformation, and offers business expertise to help media outlets thrive financially. For over 40 years, it has helped partners reach millions of people with trustworthy information that saves lives, improves livelihoods, and holds institutions accountable.

