



After the scoop How investigative journalism affects media

Case studies from around the world

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Editorial

Editorial

Supporting those dedicated to freedom of expression

During a recent trip to Kenya, I met John-Allan Namu, an investigative journalist in the truest sense. Together with his colleagues he researched the machinations of members of the East African elite during the war in South Sudan. So he started to look below the surface, speaking to informants and digging deep into the available data. The research revealed how politicians and businessmen stuffed South Sudanese property into their own pockets. John-Allan's and his colleagues' investigations triggered enormous reactions, ranging from over 600 000 viewers of three video documentaries, discussions in the Pan-African Parliament and the British House of Commons, and the dismissal of an involved South Sudanese politician. In Nairobi, Kenyans took to the streets to demonstrate against banks that got their hands dirty.

Journalists like John-Allan Namu and the media they work for play an essential part in our democracies, ensuring that those in power are held accountable. Investigative media not only put the spotlight on corrupt officials or human rights abuses. More importantly, they help kick-start discussions among ordinary citizens about the norms and standards they want to live by.

In these times, as "fake news" has become an all too familiar term in our everyday language, and many people are not quite sure who or what to believe anymore, people who seek to dissect fact from fiction help remind us all about the important role quality journalism has to play in our societies. At DW Akademie, our aim is to ensure that quality journalism in general, and investigative journalism in particular, can thrive. Only when it does, can people make informed decisions about their everyday lives.

However, in many of the countries where we work, the basic tools and knowledge are often missing; political frameworks are not supportive of muckrakers; and way too often, media organizations are not willing or able to invest the money and time that good journalism needs to thrive. Unfortunately, being good at your job as an investigative journalist does not necessarily bring you fame nor fortune. Instead, it leads to increased pressure from those in power. At times media organizations or their financial backers give in to that pressure, with the result that investigative journalists lose their jobs—and sometimes their freedom or even their lives.

We will do whatever we can to change that. Our approach is to share our expertise, not only in teaching journalistic skills but also in supporting those that are dedicated to ensuring freedom of expression, and by developing new ways to make quality media more viable in a fast-changing and challenging environment. An important part of this approach is a south-south exchange, where journalists and media owners from the Global South share their experiences and discuss possible solutions that they can apply locally.

This publication is a way to contribute to this discussion on media viability for investigative media outlets—and might also provide inspiration to media in the Global North.

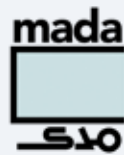


Carsten von Nahmen Head, DW Akademie

Introduction



PREMIUM
Times



ATLATZSO

KRIK



Publica

TEMPO



Introduction

A journey of hope

“We really want to do more investigative work, but how do I convince my media owner that it makes business sense at a time when we are already struggling to pay the bills? And how can you make ends meet in countries where investigating powerful businesses and the political elite might lead to financial ruin?” These are some of the questions we at DW Akademie have been hearing from editors in the Global South.

Investigative journalism serves the public interest: It can lead to changes in legislation, reframe political debates and thereby have a profound impact on the daily lives of ordinary people. This has been proven in a number of research papers in recent years. What has so far not been the focus is the impact successful investigative journalism has on the media outlet itself—its newsroom structure, its business plans, the security and well-being of its staff, or its editorial line.

Restrictive press laws, hostile language from heads of state towards the media as well as government control over big advertising budgets are the reality for an increasing number of media organizations around the world. And even those living in ‘true’ democratic countries are trying to find ways to compete with the big tech companies turned distribution platforms for a sizeable share of online advertising—and are fast coming to the conclusion that it has become impossible to live off advertising alone. In short: While the space for independent media is shrinking, quality journalism itself is becoming more expensive and complex. This has been undermining business models and at times, editorial priorities and journalistic quality. For this reason, we at DW Akademie believe that media viability is about more than money—even though there is no doubt that funds are needed to operate in the long run. The best financial planning will fail if it neglects to take into account the specific political and economic context of the media outlet. This means editorial teams must find ways to build a loyal community of readers and supporters and attract the best talents in journalism, marketing and beyond; and they should make use of technology for more effectiveness, increased safety and to circumvent any restrictions on media freedom. While this is true for all media, it is especially pressing for those that have made a conscious decision to highlight corruption and human rights abuses, no matter if this is about why the local hospital has not been refurbished or how a president is spending taxpayers’ money on personal luxuries.

But there is also good news: An impressive number of investigative media outlets have managed to stay viable and grow amidst the most difficult circumstances. On the following pages you will meet a bunch of fascinating investigative outlets and the journalists working there who offer a glimpse of hope, by proving that dictators, corrupt leaders and their like will not

always get away with what they have done. They also offer hope for the future of journalism by proving that upholding the true spirit of journalism and maintaining high editorial standards does not necessarily mean going bankrupt. The fact that such outlets exist—sometimes even thrive—actually proves the contrary and their examples are an inspiration for everyone facing similar challenges in journalism.

They have proved that investigative journalism can change local social debates, contribute to policy changes, give voice to the voiceless and bring under- or unreported topics to light. Like FrontPageAfrica’s Mae Azango from Liberia who spares her ink for those who most need it. “My ink is too good for the politicians because their pockets will only get fat. But my ink is good for a woman who is crying because her baby was raped. My ink is good for injustice, (...) my ink is good to point out the ills in society,” she says. FrontPageAfrica was the first in Liberia to highlight the plight of women undergoing female genital mutilation and Azango makes it clear that the weak and the oppressed can turn to her with their unreported stories.

“For this reason, we at DW Akademie believe that media viability is about more than money.”

These media outlets are relentless in their investigations, leaving no stone unturned even in the face of danger. Like Serbia’s KRIK which exposes links between politics and organized crime even when their journalists are being followed, smeared online, and their offices or homes broken into. This genre of uncompromising journalism in the cause of fighting corruption will usually mean less or no advertising at all; it also attracts threats, increasing the costs of security for the team and requiring more and better capacity building. But it might also contribute to a more loyal and engaged audience that is prepared to chip in financially to the costs of the outlet in exchange for this relentless reporting.

They find new, compelling ways of storytelling. Like Mada Masr in Egypt which features sharp-tongued comics, funny cartoons and illustrations alongside their articles. Increasing their audience reach by targeting new demographics such as younger, social media-savvy crowds might make outlets more attractive to advertisers, so that chances of their longer-term viability increase.

They show examples of how to use technology in an innovative way. Like Átlátszó in Hungary which deployed drones to investigate the private jet and yacht trips of Hungarian politicians and oligarchs, combining flight data with drone images. As

most of these are small outlets, operating on the fringes of their markets, innovation and tech mixed with investigative journalism is the approach which most differentiates them from their competitors. These outlets collaborate with other media, inspiring others and increasing the overall quality of reporting, thus slowly impacting the media landscape around them.

Tempo in Indonesia launched a program which promotes joint investigations with fellow outlets, sharing their independent spirit, the tradition and methods of investigative reporting. Both Agência Pública in Brazil and Plaza Pública in Guatemala have inspired other journalists in their respective countries to launch their own media, thus bringing diversity to an otherwise highly monopolized landscape. Collaboration, local or international, might serve from a viability point of view as a cost-effective way of producing more quality content. And raising local standards may mean in the long term that the approach of advertisers will also slowly change: they might be more willing to spend money even in outlets where the content is unfavorable to their business, because these contribute to the overall accountability in the country.

“ These outlets collaborate with other media, inspiring others and increasing the overall quality of reporting, thus slowly impacting the media landscape around them.

And they seek new funding and revenue sources, developing novel business models to ensure a stable foundation for quality reporting. Like Premium Times in Nigeria, fighting the old corrupt ways which meant bribing journalists in return for favorable reporting. The business model Premium Times developed offers ways of ensuring salaries and even health and life insurance, hence stability and security for the employees.

All in all they prove that good journalism can mean business, although in a completely different way than ever before in this sector, which was too often under the influence of corporations. Like Maria Ressa’s pioneering team at Rappler in the Philippines, which managed to break even in 2016 by finding a fine balance between offering breaking news and investigative stories whilst appealing to a younger, social media-focused audience. Tempo in Indonesia attracted readers by encroaching on the territory of gossip magazines with its investigations into the dealings of the rich and famous. And Guatemala’s Plaza Pública enjoys the patronage of a university, ensuring that all basic costs are covered, leaving the team free to investigate issues other media do not dare to touch—for fear of losing their biggest advertisers.

The features you will read on the following pages have been produced by a diverse group of local journalists, who are all familiar with limitations in their work as freelancers. Their diversity in style and perspective brings additional value to this publication.

“ All in all they prove that good journalism can mean business, although in a completely different way than ever before in this sector.

We are immensely grateful to all interviewees for taking the time to openly discuss the challenges they are facing. This collection of features is meant to start a discussion amongst investigative media organizations—and their supporters—on how to effectively prepare for the future. All the following examples prove that quality investigative journalism can serve as the unique selling point of a media house. This publication is therefore an inspiring journey of hope around the world.

Fasten your seat belts—it will be a bumpy ride.

Petra Aldenrath
Nadine Jurrat
Attila Mong

Africa

Liberia

Liberia has a population of around 4.7 million people. The country was ravaged by two civil wars between 1989 and 2003 and remains one of the poorest in the world, with literacy rates at around 50 percent. English is the country's official language, though more than 20 indigenous languages are spoken by the different communities. The country's media outlets all publish and broadcast in English. Due to the high illiteracy rates, limited internet access and poor infrastructure, newspapers and television are only accessible to part of the population and radio therefore plays a very important role in facilitating public debate. Liberia is ranked 93 out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling 4 places from the previous year. Journalists critical of the government are increasingly facing verbal threats from officials and physical attacks.

GUINEA

SIERRA LEONE

LIBERIA

IVORY
COAST

BENIN

NIGERIA

NIGER

CHAD

CAMEROON

Nigeria

Nigeria has a population of about 199 million people comprising over 250 different ethnic groups. After years of military rule, the country has had a democratic constitution since 1999. English is the official language, though more than 200 indigenous languages are spoken within the country. The most common are Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Fulani. The country's media outlets mostly publish in English, with radio the most popular medium among Nigerians. Although Nigeria is the biggest economy in Africa, 46 percent of the population lives in extreme poverty. Adult literacy rates are at around 60 percent. About 28 percent of the population uses the internet regularly. Nigeria is ranked 120 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling one place from the previous year. Disinformation by government officials, threats towards journalists and restrictive cyber-crime law make reporting on political issues very difficult.

Front Page Africa | Liberia

The relentless pursuit of truth

Despite the repeated imprisonment of the managing editor and multiple threats to staff, the daily FrontPageAfrica continues to push the agenda in Liberia's media landscape. They know what attracts their readers and main advertisers: quality reporting on topics that have traditionally not been covered.

On December 13, 2018, the editor of the Liberian daily FrontPageAfrica announced that the paper would in the following weeks release a series of documents showing financial mismanagement and corruption in the first year of President George Weah's government. Voices critical of the paper had demanded that it stop reporting on cases of corruption in order to project a more positive image of Liberia, but editor-in-chief Rodney Sieh argued that this would be an 'unforgivable sin'. "Shielding the realities of corruption and greed from the rest of the world under the guise of protecting Liberia's image is not the best solution to avoiding the unforgivable sin. Naming and shaming is," he argued.

The following Monday, the paper released a report detailing fraud and corruption at the highest levels of the Weah government. Backed up by a series of official documents that had been leaked to the paper in the weeks before, the first story revealed that Minister of State Nathaniel McGill and Minister of Finance Samuel Tweah had signed off on a payment of US\$182 000 to a New York-based company which had ceased to operate in 2003. The payment was supposedly to repay government debts incurred during the regime of jailed ex-president Charles Taylor. By Tuesday, McGill was on the airwaves, calling into Liberia's Truth FM Breakfast Show and threatening legal action against Sieh. He described Sieh, the press in general and FrontPageAfrica in particular as "a criminal entity" and predicted, "Rodney will go to jail." Tweah meanwhile accused Sieh of blackmail and said the government would mobilize all its resources to "weaponize against the media."

Sieh, a seasoned journalist with more than 30 years of reporting experience on Liberia, remained unperturbed. "If these people can look at glaring instances like corruption and try to demonize the press and stop them from reporting, only God knows how far they are willing to go," he told a live audience in Monrovia at the launch of his book, *Journalist on Trial*, two days later. "This is just one document that I have published that got them running from here and there. Imagine if I publish the other [ones], what will happen."

Newspaper boy

Sieh is no stranger to controversy, having had repeated run-ins with the judicial system as a result of the investigative reports on corruption among the Liberian elite and government officials



Impacting the media scene in Liberia: editor-in-chief Rodney Sieh and his staff

published in his newspaper. Yet he remains determined to continue the mission he started in 2005, when he decided to establish FrontPageAfrica. At the time, his country was just emerging from a brutal 14-year civil war in which 150 000 people had been killed and around 850 000 had fled to neighboring countries, according to United Nations figures. As the country started to rebuild, he felt it needed a media institution that could expose corruption and address the issues which had led to war: Liberia needed a voice, a medium, a forum and a marketplace of ideas that would offer an opportunity for people to air their views and concerns so that we never again had to go through the devastation we had just experienced.

FrontPageAfrica was to be that medium and that forum. Its mission, as described in Sieh's 2018 book was "to continue our aggressive and relentless pursuit of the truth, expose the corrupt and hold the feet of whoever assumed leadership of the post-war government to the fire." Sieh's passion for journalism was sparked when he was a teenager: In 1981, his uncle Kenneth Best established a new independent newspaper, the *Daily Observer*, and Sieh, aged 13 at the time, decided to become a newspaper boy, selling copies of the paper on the



FrontPageAfrica reporter at work

streets of Monrovia after school. He also spent many hours observing the reporters at work in the newsroom of what would become Liberia's leading newspaper in the 1980s. In 1992, as Liberia descended further into war, he followed his uncle Kenneth to the Gambia where he worked as the BBC correspondent and also reported for his uncle's new Observer newspaper. In 1994, however, Sieh was forced to flee the Gambia to the United States, as the regime of Gambian leader Yahya Jammeh started to crack down on journalists critical of the military leadership. In the US, he was able to further develop his reporting skills, studying at City University of New York and working at several American dailies. Throughout this period, he continued to follow events in his home country and, after the war ended in 2003, he teamed up with two Liberian colleagues and two of his cousins to found a new online newspaper. Sieh initially funded the new venture with a bank loan and his savings. When he moved back to the Liberian capital Monrovia in 2008, the paper expanded to include a printed edition, with a print run of 1500 copies.

Newspaper of the people

Today, FrontPageAfrica has a staff of 28 reporters, editors and web designers working at its Monrovia offices, which are housed in a single-storey building in the Congotown area.

From the very beginning, investigative reporting formed an integral part of the paper's journalistic mission, with reporters tackling a wide variety of issues from corruption, fraud and misappropriation of government funds to societal issues such as female genital mutilation, prostitution and police brutality. The team used what Sieh describes as "unconventional methods" to report stories, following up on leads provided by members of the public. "Readers and whistleblowers share information with us—in the form of documents, emails, bank statements—and we use this to further analyze and investigate the story," he says.

“Liberia needed a voice, a medium, a forum and a marketplace of ideas that would offer an opportunity for people to air their views and concerns so that we never again had to go through the devastation we had just experienced.”

One of the most impactful investigations from 2007 involved a cache of about 400 emails that was handed to Sieh by an anonymous source in Washington DC. It exposed widespread corruption among top government officials in Ellen Johnson



Sirleaf's government, which had been elected to office in 2006. Among them was a series of emails written by a former minister of state at the time, Willes Knuckles, who had solicited money from foreign companies in exchange for government contracts. In some cases, this had allegedly taken place with the agreement of President Sirleaf. The emails showed that, in one case alone, Knuckles had solicited a US\$2.5 million "success fee" from a company that had won a mining contract in Liberia's mineral-rich western region. Despite threats from lawyers in Liberia and the US, Sieh decided to publish the 'Knucklesgate' articles. "It was one of the biggest scandals in Liberia's history and it paved the way for us becoming the country's leading newspaper," he says. While the President initially tried to distance herself from Knuckles and the emails, by the summer of 2008 'Knucklesgate II' had become embarrassing for her government, and she therefore decided to establish a committee to investigate the email chain. This eventually led to the cancellation of US\$1 billion worth of concessions and several government officials being fired. Internationally, the President at the time still enjoyed the reputation of a "rockstar", according to Sieh, but as the years went by and other cases of fraud in the mining sector were exposed, this changed. "Although in the beginning [of the Sirleaf presidency] there was not much attention on Liberia with regards to corruption, I think towards the end one saw that the work we have been doing all along pointed to some issues of discrepancy," he says.

Today, the paper is widely recognized as the country's leading media outlet, setting the national news agenda and shaping public debate in Liberia and among the diaspora in Europe and the US. Over the years, the FrontPageAfrica team has won multiple national media awards, including 'Journalist of the Year' and 'Media House of the Year', which has raised the bar for journalism in Liberia. The paper and its staff have also won a series of international awards, including the Committee to Protect Journalists' 'Press Freedom Award' in 2012 and the 2014 Reporters Without Borders Press Award. Prue Clarke, a media development specialist who has worked across Africa and followed media development in Liberia for the past 14 years, says that FrontPageAfrica has had a huge impact on the overall quality and breadth of reporting in Liberia. "If you are in a country where no one is doing better than the National Enquirer, then there is no incentive to do better," she says. "If you then allow a New York Times to come into that market, suddenly the standard goes up. That's the role that FrontPageAfrica has played." Today's Liberian media scene is diverse, with about 20 online and print publications and around 125 radio stations that broadcast locally and nationally. "Today, you will see quality stories from the Daily Observer and the online newspaper Bush Chicken," says Clarke. "Eight years ago, you didn't see anything of quality. The competition now is much fiercer."

“Readers and whistleblowers share information with us — in the form of documents, emails, bank statements — and we use this to further analyze and investigate the story.”

Stories that are broken by FrontPageAfrica are often picked up by other papers, but also by radio stations across Liberia, which helps further boost its reputation. The latter is of crucial importance in a country where, according to United Nations figures, only 8.4 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2018 and literacy rates are below 50 percent. "When we became a print newspaper, many of our stories started dominating the discussions on radio stations, people discussed them in local bars," says Sieh. "It has become a national phenomenon."

“It was one of the biggest scandals in Liberia's history and it paved the way for us becoming the country's leading newspaper.”

Meanwhile, the newspaper's comment section and its Facebook page have become spaces of lively—and sometimes

fierce—debate. The paper is also currently working on developing audio and video material that will be broadcast through its website.

“If you are in a country where no one is doing better than the National Enquirer, then there is no incentive to do better. If you then allow a New York Times to come into that market, suddenly the standard goes up. That’s the role that FrontPageAfrica has played.

“People regard it as the newspaper of the people,” says Lennart Doodoo, FrontPageAfrica’s newsroom chief. “As early as 4 a.m., people are logging on to our website to know what FrontPage has reported. Anyone can come to us with information and we will follow up to investigate whether there is any substance to the information and if so, we report on it.” This unconventional approach, which was adopted from the start by FrontPageAfrica, has yielded some of the newspaper’s biggest stories, including ‘Knucklesgate’ and the revelations about financial mismanagement in the first year of the Weah administration.

Financial independence

FrontPageAfrica’s achievements over the past 12 years are all the more remarkable given the challenging environment in which the newspaper operates. Liberia’s media is ranked 89 out of 180 in the Reporters Without Borders 2018 World Press Freedom Index, with numerous challenges to independent media. The main problem is the lack of financial independence of most media houses and their frequent inability to pay staff. The government remains the main advertiser for most newspapers—representing up to 80 percent of advertising revenue according to Clarke—and many politicians also have a stake in a newspaper or local radio station. Negative reporting on government policy or the dealings of individual politicians can therefore result in government withholding payment or a politician withdrawing his financial support as a way of controlling news content, according to Daniel Nyakonah, the secretary general of the Press Union of Liberia. “If you dare to be critical and independent in a media economy where the government is the main provider of advertisement, you run the risk that they stop giving you ads and you slowly go under,” he says.

Lack of funds means editors often cannot pay their journalists for months; as of December 2018, two of Liberia’s main newspapers had not paid staff salaries in eight months. Instead, journalists are often paid by the people they report on, who entice them to attend press conferences or events by offering

payment in the form of brown envelopes filled with cash, or, more subtly, fees for ‘transport costs’ or per diems. There is no independent study on the extent of this so-called ‘brown-envelope reporting’ in Liberia, which media specialist Clarke describes as ‘bribes’. “If you give me an amount that is ten times higher than my actual transport cost, then I will write positively about you,” she says. “There is no incentive for me to investigate the story more in depth or to choose a story that is not paid for.” The result is that many stories featured in Liberian media are one-dimensional rewrites of press releases that lack context and analysis. FrontPageAfrica has a zero-tolerance policy towards brown-envelope reporting and has already fired several reporters over such payments.

“If you dare to be critical and independent in a media economy where the government is the main provider of advertisement, you run the risk that they stop giving you ads and you slowly go under.

But Sieh says it remains a huge challenge. “I won’t lie to you: it is very difficult,” he says. “This country is very vulnerable and we cannot monitor our staff 24/7 to see what they are doing. But we do try to limit it as much as possible.” The low wages in the media sector also mean that journalism is not respected as a profession, with many using it as a stepping stone to better-paid jobs in public relations, the government or NGOs. The average monthly salary for a journalist lies around US\$100, which is considerably below the official minimum wage of US\$192 a month for a 48-hour work week. This does not cover the cost of living, especially in the capital Monrovia where most media houses are concentrated.

Liberian journalists also have to contend with draconian criminal and civil libel laws, which authorities have repeatedly invoked over the years to intimidate journalists. “Libel and defamation are crimes under Liberian law for which you are tried in criminal court,” Nyakonah explains. “You are entitled to a bond, but if you can’t pay it, you go to jail. And because most journalists and media houses cannot pay, they are basically punished before their case is even heard.” In 2013, FrontPageAfrica’s managing editor Sieh ended up in prison after publishing a series of articles on former minister of agriculture Chris Toe who, according to an audit report, had embezzled millions of dollars of aid money intended to combat an epidemic of army worm. Toe sued FrontPageAfrica and Sieh for libel, and Liberia’s Supreme Court ordered the newspaper to pay the ex-minister US\$1.5 million in damages. As Sieh failed to pay, the newspaper was shut down for three months and he was sent to Monrovia Central Prison. “During the period of the shutdown, a lot of my staffers were offered jobs in government in hopes of having me lose them



© F. de Chatel

Market stalls in Monrovia

and minimize any effort to resume in the future. All of them refused offers,” Sieh remembers. He was only released after four months’ detention following an international outcry. As for Toe, he was later dismissed, though never prosecuted.

“FrontPageAfrica has a zero-tolerance policy towards brown-envelope reporting and has already fired several reporters over such payments.

In this challenging media environment, FrontPageAfrica has distinguished itself, not just through the quality of its reporting, but also through its business model. The paper has built a strong advertising base that includes the country’s two main mobile phone operators and several other foreign advertisers. “[FrontPageAfrica’s] big advertiser is Orange, which makes a difference as it shelters [the paper] from the financial pressure others experience,” says Clarke. “Orange wants to be associated with the best media house in the country, the one that the diaspora goes to. That’s why being the leading newspaper and investigative media house pays off financially as well.”

In addition, Sieh has maintained strong partnerships with international media organizations such as Thomson Reuters and New Narratives, which provide special grants for investigative reporting projects on subject areas such as natural resources, the environment, women, health and education, as well as on-the-job support for investigative reporting. This allows the paper to pay its staff a regular salary of around US\$300 a month and remain fully independent, with the freedom to engage in in-depth investigative reporting in a way that other media outlets cannot afford.

Threats, harassment and physical attacks

Over the years, FrontPageAfrica’s reports have had a far-reaching impact in several domains, leading to the sacking of scores of corrupt government officials and the cancellation of a number of fraudulent concession agreements in the country’s rich mining sector over the last 14 years. FrontPageAfrica’s ongoing commitment to investigative reporting, tackling corruption and highlighting social taboos means its reporters have over the years been subjected to multiple threats, harassment and physical attacks, in addition to repeated libel suits, staff arrests



Breaking taboos and highlighting the issues of girls and women: Mae Azango

and imprisonment. For instance, in the run-up to the 2011 election, a reporter covering a campaign speech by candidate George Weah was assaulted by a group of his supporters who were angry at FrontPageAfrica's reports about Weah and his party, the Coalition for Democratic Change. "We receive threats every day," says Sieh. "There are people out there who try to minimize what [we] do and try to intimidate [us] in all kinds of ways—legal stuff, arson attempts on your office, threats to reporters... We try to stay above the fray and continue doing our work." While the paper does not have the resources to provide protection to staff, it does employ security guards at the FrontPageAfrica offices and staff are encouraged to leave the office on time.

“ Sieh has made a conscious effort to hire women and report on women's issues — a “radical decision” in a patriarchal society like Liberia.

But FrontPageAfrica's investigations also go beyond politics, with regular reporting on human rights abuses, poverty and other social issues. Sieh has made a conscious effort to hire women and report on women's issues—a “radical decision” in a patriarchal society like Liberia, according to media specialist Prue Clarke, where until recently certain editors refused to hire any women at all on the grounds that they were ‘lazy’. “Rodney just said, ‘I don't believe that, women are half my audience,’” says Clarke. “There was an idea that the only legitimate stories were scandal and politics,” she adds. “Rodney changed that. He didn't hesitate to put stories about child prostitution and

female genital cutting on the front page. That was radical. Since then you see stories like that on the front page of other papers, too. Because they came to understand that there is a broader range of stories.”

FrontPageAfrica reporter Mae Azango has received numerous prizes for her work on women's rights and gender-based violence, with hard-hitting investigations on prostitution, police brutality, rape and human trafficking. “Women's stories were not normally told because many newspapers were dominated by men,” she remembers. “So women's stories were always trashed. In fact, women reporters were not given hard stories; instead they got to cover parties and social events. They said women reporters were not tough.” Azango's own life experiences form a strong driver for her reporting work and her continued focus on women, children and disadvantaged communities. After nearly dying in childbirth during the war, she was forced to flee to Ivory Coast where she lived for three years “as a second-class citizen” with no rights. When she returned to Liberia in 2000, she enrolled in a journalism school, initially to “kill time and get off the street,” but quickly she discovered “the power of the pen.”

“When I came from Ivory Coast, I decided that I would use my voice for the less fortunate,” she says. “I told anybody and I tell you today: My ink is too good for the politicians because their pockets will only get fat. But my ink is good for a woman who is crying because her baby was raped. My ink is good for injustice, my ink is good to point out the ills in society.”

Azango says she started reporting on women's issues shortly after joining FrontPageAfrica in 2007, where she received

training from Clarke's media development organization New Narratives. "As women we need to champion the cause of women," she says. "People need to know what's happening to us and that it is not only about men and politics."

Between 2010 and 2012, Azango reported on different aspects of female genital mutilation (FGM), and even went undercover to interview women who practice FGM. The reports forced her into hiding for three weeks, but also triggered nationwide discussions on what had until then been a taboo subject. According to Sieh, Azango's FGM reporting led to a landmark executive action as former president Sirleaf banned the practice in her final act as president. Around half of women and girls aged 15 to 49 in Liberia have undergone FGM or cutting, but the topic remains sensitive as it is mainly associated with women's initiation into adulthood. "Before I published the story, it was a taboo," says Azango. "No one dared to talk about FGM. Not the government, not NGOs, not the United Nations, no one." The article that was published on International Women's Day in 2012 told the story of a woman who had been held down by five women while she was cut, and detailed the ritual that was part of the initiation ritual. The report also looked at the health implications of the procedure and the great risks that girls as young as four years old were being exposed to. Following the article's publication, Azango and her daughter were forced into hiding after receiving multiple threats. But something had been set in motion: "For three weeks while I was in hiding, every radio station, TV station and newspaper was discussing Mae Azango," she remembers.

Within a month of the report's publication, the government announced that activities around FGM were to be indefinitely suspended. "It was the first time in history that a government spoke out on this issue," Azango says, though she is under no illusion that the ban is actually being upheld and she continues to follow the story to report, for example, on instances of local politicians promising to shield FGM practices in local bush schools in exchange for votes.

Growing hostility against the media

Since the release of the first documents regarding financial mismanagement in President George Weah's government in December 2018, the debate about press freedom in Liberia has escalated, with widespread criticism of the government officials' verbal attacks on the media in general and FrontPageAfrica in particular. In response to the threats from ministers Tweah and McGill, the Press Union of Liberia issued a statement on December 21, 2018 expressing concern about the growing hostility against the media "from within the power [circle] of President George M. Weah" and calling on the president to "advise his assistants to end their inflammatory comments and actions against the media." The international media organization Reporters Without Borders also issued a

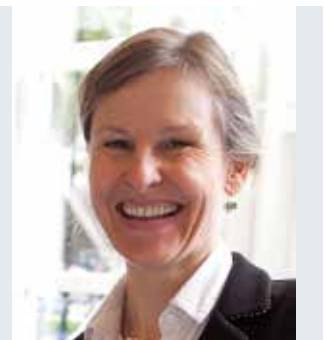
statement on December 20, 2018, calling on President Weah to keep his promises to respect press freedom and combat corruption by unreservedly condemning the threats issued by Minister of State McGill.

“I told anybody and I tell you today: My ink is too good for the politicians because their pockets will only get fat. But my ink is good for a woman who is crying because her baby was raped. My ink is good for injustice, ... my ink is good to point out the ills in society.

Meanwhile, work at FrontPageAfrica continues as usual, though the team has had to slow down on the release of further documents after two suspected sources have been fired from their jobs in government. To date, no lawsuit has been filed against the paper or its editor, but Sieh says he expects a case will be filed. He remains sanguine about the recent threats by McGill and Tweah against him and the newspaper: "I was expecting it," he says. "No one who embezzles government money wants to be exposed. So every time you expose these people they will look for a way to fight back." However, he is determined to continue the work he set out to do when he created FrontPageAfrica in 2005. "We are obligated to our readers to continue our work so that we can expose not just corruption, but also other issues that affect human and civil rights," he says.

Author

Francesca de Châtel is a Dutch-born freelance journalist, editor and writer. She has been reporting from Liberia since 2015.



Premium Times | Nigeria

Powering investigative journalism is not a smooth ride

“Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching,” goes a popular Nigerian proverb. Nigerian journalism, long the target of powerful political enemies and disgruntled governments, has learned to adapt to life on the edge by testing new revenue models.

In Nigeria, it appears that there is a renaissance of investigative journalism in the newsrooms. Developments including the 2011 Freedom of Information Act have offered a springboard for this resurgence in investigative reportage across the country. Journalists have been buoyed by recent wins recorded as a result of their reporting in the country.

At the leading edge of this wave is Premium Times, which most recently published an investigation into the background of Finance Minister Kemi Adeosun, revealing that her exemption certificate from the National Youth Service Corps was forged. As a result, she was forced to vacate her position. Founded in mid-2011, the independent news platform notably publishes investigative reports “with a focus on government accountability and the protection of human rights for citizens regardless of religious, ethnic or political affiliations,” according to its mission statement. Located in Nigeria’s capital, Abuja, Premium Times has no signposts identifying its headquarters which is tucked away, somewhat obscurely, in a residential neighborhood, ensconced between a gigantic block of flats known as Ministerial Quarters and a Catholic seminary. Premium Times occupies three of the six flats in the building. A finger print access system lets you into the newsroom which contains an octagonal array of desktop computers and laptops in cubicles.

“Premium Times publisher Dapo Olorunyomi believes the media was failing in its duty to monitor the political environment and it was on this basis that he conceived Premium Times.

Historically, the two-headed albatross of finance and political interference hung around the necks of media owners has made it impossible to witness the level of independence that is usually expected from the fourth estate. It is generally recognized that successive Nigerian governments, along with their private sector cronies, tend to starve media of their lifeblood by withdrawing advertising—the dominant source of revenue for the publications—as a retaliatory measure to certain investigative reports. This was also the fate of the now defunct NEXT newspaper that started up in 2008, the first of its kind in the country with offices in



Making the most of the crisis: publisher Dapo Olorunyomi

Lagos and an entire desk assigned to investigative reporting. It eventually became the yardstick in contemporary newsrooms across the country. But its operations ended barely three years into its existence as a result of accumulated debts. This led to the emergence of new media platforms like Premium Times, which has resorted to a more innovative means of financing its operations. A number of key players at NEXT moved on to form Premium Times but not without a conscious decision to rejig the traditional business model and to also focus mainly on investigative reporting. At the time of writing, Premium Times has an estimated 27 million monthly unique visitors (December 2018). NEXT failed at a time when the media in Nigeria was also undergoing a severe crisis—in terms of its revenue models, but also with regard to public trust and ethics.

Premium Times publisher Dapo Olorunyomi believes the media was failing in its duty to monitor the political environment and it was on this basis that he conceived Premium Times. According to him, the crisis was of an existential nature: “We thought that Nigerian journalism was going through a process of ethical challenge of an unprecedented nature,” Olorunyomi states.



Circumventing traditional business models

The Premium Times reporting model advocates for transparency and human rights and in accordance with this creed, its reporting has led to some of the biggest investigations in Nigeria as it continues to serve as a watchdog to society. Among its key investigations was the 2015 discovery of an arms procurement deal under the Goodluck Jonathan administration in Nigeria that resulted in the embezzlement of US\$2 billion through the Office of the National Security Adviser, then headed by Colonel Sambo Dasuki. The story gave an exposé of the activities of the National Security Adviser and revealed how slush funds from the office were shared among politicians for election purposes, instead of funding ways to stop the Boko Haram terrorist group ransacking communities across the country, particularly in northeast Nigeria. Besides the debates and conversations generated by the exposé across the country, the story led to the arrest and detention of high-profile officials and actors involved in the scandal.

Olorunyomi stresses that “the security sector stories which led to the Dasukigate enquiries had the most impact.” He further points to why stories written at Premium Times are trusted, as these stories have led to changes in government and have promoted open government. “Nobody ever saw the National Assembly budget until we decided to go into intense reporting which led to the campaign to #OpenNASS.” The #OpenNASS campaign, which was started by Premium Times on August 18, 2018 ensured that the Nigerian parliament disclosed its expenditure for the first time after many years of opacity. As a result, Nigerian people now know what their lawmakers take home on a monthly, quarterly and yearly basis.

As in the case of 234Next, critical media platforms have all too often witnessed deliberate sabotage of their advert-based business revenue. Advertisers are forced to pull the plug as a

result of vested interests, leaving media organizations with a huge backlog of unpaid salaries and unfulfilled obligations. Eventually, many of them simply shut down.

Premium Times is determined to avoid this. With a three-pronged approach, the company has found a model that has helped it sustain its operations effectively. For the first part, the organization offers special analysis, data and intelligence reports to its mostly corporate clients across the country.

It delivers these services through the use of some of its proprietary technology platforms. Secondly, the online news platform offers a unique range of advertising opportunities to its clients, leveraging the trust of its millions of readers. The platform is ranked among the top most visited websites in Nigeria, according to the analytics software Alexa rankings (January 2019). Thirdly, the organization has established a not-for-profit newsroom, the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, which has helped to provide the majority of funding for many of the investigative stories written by the platform. In the last three years alone, the Centre has received just over 1.5 million US dollars in funding from a number of donors including private foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation (\$1,200,000) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (\$499,997), which allows it to cover specific priority areas.

“When we started, our belief was that we must find other ways of making money to power journalism.”

“When we started, our belief was that we must find other ways of making money to power journalism,” says Musikilu Mojeed, editor-in-chief and chief operating officer in charge of the 41 staff and freelance personnel at Premium Times. “We have strict financial discipline, so we are able to pay our bills.” According to Mojeed, the Centre obtains the grants and then the reporters at Premium Times are assigned to help execute the projects for which they have been funded. “For instance, if the Centre gets funding to report on a couple of stories in the health sector, it may take two to three reporters from Premium Times and fund their salaries for that period.” Other revenue streams include book publishings and hosting branded events. The Premium Times model offers a lesson in circumventing traditional



© M. Abang

Newspaper stand in Abuja

business models for publishing media worldwide to emulate, with an emphasis on credibility, better business strategy and alternative funding from private philanthropic actors.

“... the integrity and credibility that lets them take a deep-dive into issues makes Premium Times an advertisers’ delight because of the growing number of visitors on the platform.

For the business development manager and associate editor, Abdulaziz Abdulaziz, the integrity and credibility that lets them take a deep-dive into issues makes Premium Times an advertisers’ delight because of the growing number of visitors on the platform. Dealing with advertisers for an investigative news platform is not always a smooth ride, given the fact that some of them would try to muzzle the outfit. “It is tricky, it costs us business—the fact that you’re advertising with us does not mean you will not find stories that are not palatable,” Abdulaziz explains. “There is no hostility because you are not doing business with us and there are no extra favors because you are doing business with us; some felt bad and withdrew their ads,” says Abdulaziz. But nonetheless, Premium Times still enjoys patronage from “advertisers who come here because they know that if it is on Premium Times people will see it and they will reach their right audience,” he adds.

Abdulaziz, who recently emerged as the 2018 Nigerian Investigative Reporter of the Year, says Premium Times’ greatest asset

for business is its credibility: “A lot of time without canvassing, people call to place adverts and that is why by any strand we don’t compromise on that because it is our major selling point, that integrity and believability.”

The death of brown envelopes and the rise of credibility

To stay the course as Nigeria’s most authoritative news platform, it has been necessary to avoid situations where journalists shift focus from altruistic or impartial reporting to waiting for ‘brown envelope gifts’—a common practice in Nigeria. It is a term for the transaction between news makers and journalists, whereby journalists get paid to publish stories. The envelopes are usually offered ostensibly to cover transportation and logistics after a reporting event or an assignment. While many journalists are involved in this unethical practice, the poor working conditions of press people across the country have continued to negatively impact editorial independence and investigative reporting.

Editor-in-chief Musikilu Mojeed says precautions have been put in place to prevent journalists at Premium Times from taking gifts from sources or anyone at all. “We have remained consistent in the payment of salaries, we try to provide other incentives,” he maintains. “Our staff have health insurance, they have life insurance and we try to send them for training locally and internationally.” This practice, however, is not the norm for media organizations in Nigeria, a country where most journalists are not paid at all. “We tell anyone who wants to work here,

we are always forthright in telling them, we are a crusading media organization, we will not tolerate the brown envelope syndrome here,” Mojeed adds.

“We tell anyone who wants to work here... we will not tolerate the brown envelope syndrome here.

As a result of some of their investigative reporting, Premium Times has won several awards which include, most notably, the Pulitzer Prize as part of the consortium involved in the Panama Papers revelations in April 2017. It was also awarded the 2017 Global Shining Light Award for investigative work on the extra-judicial killings in Nigeria's south-east, presented by the Global Investigative Journalism Network, GIJN. Mujeed, however, says their focus is not about being recognized; most of the time journalists at Premium Times are encouraged not to apply for awards. This, he says, is so that reporters do not develop a mind-set aimed at winning awards, but work hard towards telling the stories that have impact instead. “If awards come, that’s just icing on the cake and that is not something we dwell so much on,” he stresses. “What we want to do is do journalism of impact.”

Defending its journalists

However, in telling stories that dig into corruption, leading to high profile probes and the sacking of government ministers, Premium Times has also attracted ongoing threats and harassment by state actors; editors and reporters have been detained. Only recently, in 2018, Samuel Ogundipe, one of its general assignment reporters, was arrested by the police and accused of stealing classified government documents.

His investigation in August 2018 revealed gross violation of the Nigerian constitution by a former boss of Nigeria's secret police, Lawal Daura, who was sacked immediately following the revelation. Premium Times released leaked letters to the presidency signed by the former Inspector General of Police, Idris Abubakar, which pointed to Daura as the architect of a siege on the legislative arm of government. “I was detained in custody with criminals for three days,” recalls Ogundipe, who released the files. “I do feel like if anything happens to me in Nigeria, there won’t be justice and that’s my cause for concern as a journalist.” Though the case is still in court, organizations like Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) are advocating for the police to withdraw the case.

But the journalist expresses confidence in Premium Times management and says that he is working with employers who not only back him as a reporter but are willing and always ready with legal representation where the need arises. Premium Times has a team of legal advisers on the ground to defend its journalists.

Quality needs capacity

Premium Times is supported by a number of private philanthropic foundations and development partners through its non-profit arm, the aforementioned Centre for Investigative Journalism. The organization still requires a lot of funding and other resources in order to hire more qualified staff, especially in the important development sectors of Nigerian society. And more importantly, funding is needed to improve the capabilities of its investigative reporters in the field of data journalism. Although the Centre currently has capacity for data journalism, it is totally overstretched as it is the only major organization that is helping with the training of reporters in data journalism in newsrooms throughout the country. Apart from raw data, Ogundipe sees Premium Times focusing on another aspect—providing more context in its reporting. There is much to be done if the news site is to continue to build its credibility and with that, its audience.

Author
Mercy Abang is a Nigerian journalist, focusing on underreported or never reported stories on the African continent. She works as an international media fixer and television host with Gatefield Television. She is the 2017 United Nations' Dag Hammarskjold Journalism Fellow.



Asia

Philippines

The Philippines has a population of around 104 million people, the majority of them living on eleven of a total of more than 7600 islands. The country returned to democracy in 1986 after more than a decade of martial law under President Ferdinand Marcos. In office since 2016, President Rodrigo Duterte's term has been characterized by increased levels of violence as well as verbal and legal attacks on independent media. The country's official languages are Filipino and English which are also the languages mostly used by national broadcast media. The Philippines enjoys a literacy rate of about 96 percent. Around 60 percent of the population has regular access to the internet. Particularly social media is very popular with nearly 99 percent of internet users actively accessing at least one type of social media platform on a regular basis. The Philippines is ranked 134 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling one place from the previous year.

PHILIPPINES

INDONESIA

Indonesia

The Republic of Indonesia has about 260 million inhabitants. Its territory comprises more than 17 000 islands and hundreds of different ethnic and linguistic groups. Java, the country's most populous island, is home to more than half of the population. The official language, Indonesian, is spoken by the majority of inhabitants, often next to at least one local language. The country's literacy rate stands at just over 95 percent. Although the use of online media is increasing, TV remains the most popular medium. Around 33 percent of Indonesia's population has access to the internet. Indonesia is ranked 124 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—keeping its position from the previous year.

Rappler | Philippines

Ducking is not on the agenda

In one of Asia's most dangerous countries for journalists, Rappler's female founders are sticking to what they believe is the most effective way to document human rights abuses and corruption: technology. Increasing pressure from the government to close them down is proof of their success, especially among millennials.

High up in a modern mall at the heart of Manila's business district, overlooking the bustling Philippine capital, lie the headquarters of Rappler. The floor is littered with orange and white balloons, a luminous orange 'R' welcomes you at the front door. Open the doors and you walk straight into a buzzing hive of activity, where editors hot-desk alongside busy reporters—all of them surrounded by quirky quotes scrawled across the glass wall that separates Rappler's meeting rooms in an otherwise open plan office. TV screens flash headlines as the team dips in and out. Small groups of young reporters, with computers on their laps, huddle in groups on the floor, energetically discussing their ideas.

Right in the middle of this dynamic newsroom are the desks of Rappler's founding members, Maria Ressa, Glenda Gloria, Chay Hofileña and Beth Frondoso, who jokingly refer to themselves as 'manangs' (the old ladies). While Hofileña, Gloria and Frondoso cover Rappler's editorial direction, video production and training, Ressa's main job is to ensure that the media site remains viable. She is the only one with a separate office.

This encouraging atmosphere aside, a security guard stands at the front door, a reflection on the political context Rappler is operating in. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the Philippines are one of the deadliest countries for journalists in South East Asia. CPJ ranks the Philippines fifth on its Impunity Index, which measures the extent to which the killers of journalists escape punishment. Since Rodrigo Duterte came to power in 2016, violence in the country has increased dramatically. According to human rights organizations, around 20 000 people have been killed in Duterte's proclaimed war on drugs within the first two years of his presidency alone. The Philippine President is also known for his hate towards the media, stating shortly after his inauguration that some of the many journalists killed in the country had deserved to die.

To Ressa, this is part of the Duterte administration's increasingly desperate efforts to harass and silence independent media in a way that is meant for maximum intimidation. "Fake News" is how the president has described Rappler, which has become a focus of the regime as it has been investigating corruption, police brutality and other human rights abuses by those in power. The administration also tried to revoke Rappler's operating licence and its reporters have been banned from covering all presidential events in and out of the country; since February 2018, Rappler has been barred from entering the Malacañang



presidential palace. But this was just a taste of what was to come: Tax evasion cases filed by the Department of Justice in November 2018 culminated in arrest warrants against Ressa and Rappler Holdings that were issued by Rodrigo Duterte himself. If convicted, Ressa will face a ten year prison sentence.

She heard about the arrest warrant while travelling outside of the country to receive several awards. Upon returning on December 2, 2018, she surrendered, promptly posting bail the morning after she arrived. "On November 8, I received the ICFJ [International Center for Journalism] Award. A few hours after I got the award, the government releases a press release from the Department of Justice saying that I'd been indicted along with Rappler Holdings," she says. "Maybe they got pissed. Whatever," she laughs. "I don't know. Regardless, it was the worst thing they could have done because the timing was just perfect." International media from Deutsche Welle to the Guardian and the Washington Post reported on her arrest. Barely three months later, National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) agents entered the Rappler offices in Manila armed with an arrest warrant for Ressa. With the courts closed, Ressa spent the night in the NBI headquarters.



Breaking boundaries: Rappler's founders Beth Frondoso, Chay Hofileña, Maria Ressa and Glenda Gloria with Chairman of the Board Manny Ayala

In a little over a year, as of June 2019, Ressa and Rappler have battled a total of eleven cases and filed bail eight times. She is free on bail for now but says “ducking” is not on the agenda. According to international press freedom experts, the President’s aim is clear: he seeks to revoke Rappler’s operating license so that they stop reporting on Duterte’s murderous drug war. But its founders are adamant about Rappler’s mission. “In the Philippines, both online and offline, the world we live in is ruled by violence and the violence leads to fear,” says Hofileña. “When the government attacks you make a decision: Are we going to pursue with hard-hitting investigative reports against a vindictive government or are we going to duck? And wait it out? Well, you can’t wait this out.” And so Rappler has remained open whilst facing the charges head on.

Strong, smart and dedicated to quality journalism

Rappler’s energetic, resilient approach has been characteristic of the company since its inception in 2011. “We’ve walked away from much more profitable salaries because we wanted to be independent and we were willing to take the risk of what that meant,” says Hofileña, who was the head of Newsbreak before joining Rappler.

From the beginning, technological innovation as well as a sound business plan were key elements to securing an independent editorial line. “We wanted to experiment. We were looking at

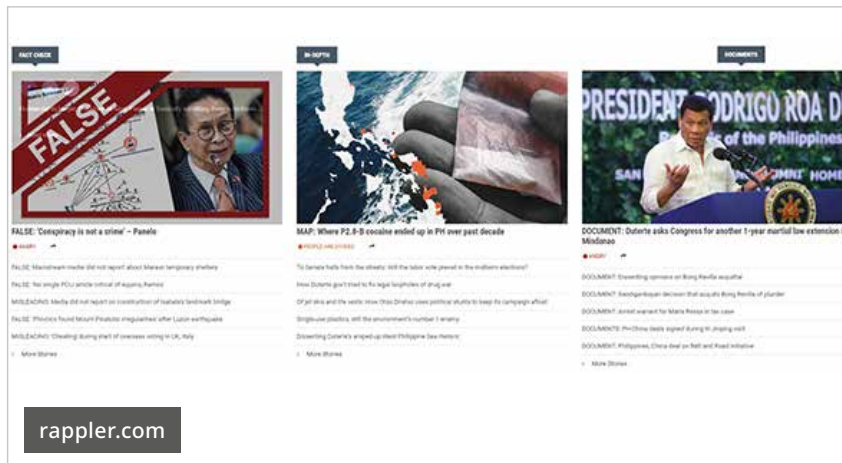
how technology could be used to help jumpstart development. We were looking at the impact of journalism,” Hofileña states.

“ We were the new kid on the block in 2012 and we inspired the youth’s curiosity with this new technology-fuelled organization, especially because the Philippines is a social media capital.

Initially, they started as a Facebook page, combining live breaking news and investigative journalism built for a new online audience. “The reason we combined the two was precisely the context of the market here in the Philippines. You have to get your brand out to build a community and the way to do that is to get good exclusives, insider information, and be the first to go live for any major story,” says Glenda Gloria, now Managing Editor at Rappler.

And Ressa adds: “We were the new kid on the block in 2012 and we inspired the youth’s curiosity with this new technology-fuelled organization, especially because the Philippines is a social media capital.” In the Philippines, 95 per cent of people that are online use Facebook.

The tipping point was January 2012 when the Corona series was the first investigative report published on rappler.com—



an exclusive on Chief Justice Renato Corona's false doctorate in civil law granted by the University of Santo Tomas. "Rappler was born on Facebook. We tested it on Facebook—and then we came out with the exclusive on the Chief Justice," remembers Gloria. "It was our first story—the biggest story—and Rappler was known immediately by the market for this exclusive. In a way, this story gave us immediately a kind of branding that is Rappler." Since then, Rappler's founders have built a newsroom of more than 100 staffers from scratch—young and mostly female—eager to learn from Rappler's female initiators. And while other media outlets have laid off reporters in the past years, Rappler's senior managers cut their own pay by 20 percent to keep their newsroom fully staffed. There is no middle management layer at Rappler, decisions are largely made collectively by its founding editors with the aim of maintaining its sustainability as a media outlet.

“There is no middle management layer at Rappler, decisions are largely made collectively by its founding editors with the aim of maintaining its sustainability as a media outlet.”

Today, Rappler is an internationally recognized and award-winning media site. At journalism gatherings in the United States and Europe, international colleagues hail Ressa as a fighter for press freedom. Ressa, a Filipino American who emigrated to the United States as a child during the Marcos regime, returned to the Philippines in the late 1980s. Since then, she has done her share of covering war zones and reporting from the field in Southeast Asia. In 2018, she was named one of Time Magazine's Most Iconic People. On December 18, 2018, CPJ named Rappler its first beneficiary of a fundraising campaign to provide legal support for journalists facing extensive

legal battles meant to suppress critical journalism. The International Center for Journalists and Reporters Without Borders have also pledged their support. Ressa says that this is important—financially, morally and in terms of security: "It sends a signal that the government can't bankrupt us."

However, Hofileña admits that solidarity at home has been more cautious. "Democracy is under threat in this country, the media should be pushing back but we're not seeing enough of that. After the arrest warrant was hurled at us there was no strong outburst from the local media. We can understand be-

cause they could be facing the same thing. All Duterte needs to do is to hit them publicly."

Capturing the millennial audience

As the first online-only news organization in the Philippines, Rappler soon became the platform of the millennials, with the majority of their readers being between 18-34 years old. According to Ressa, this is another reason why President Duterte has been targeting the media outlet. "We feel the responsibility precisely to shape up the generation for the better given the challenges online—how technology's rewiring our brain," Ressa says. For her, the Filipino millennials are ambitious like Rappler. They know how to have fun but at the same time they care for the community, justice and human rights which are also the values Rappler as an organization carries. And Rappler has been experimenting with different formats, starting out with longform pieces. "We're in touch with our readers, know what they want and how much they can take," Managing Editor Gloria says.

After their analysis showed that their readers were just skimming through their lengthy articles, Rappler turned to series-led investigations and increasingly to video. Its 2018 series, 'Murder in Manila', a six month investigation into drug-related vigilante killings seen through the eyes of the killers, was broken up into seven parts, each averaging less than 2000 words.

"It's a chicken and egg thing," adds Gloria. "The sceptics were discouraging us from pursuing longform because they felt like it would not take off online. But the market will never be ready for anything unless you try it. I mean, in the same manner the market wasn't ready for something like Rappler. But as journalists, we have perennial faith in the reader. That ultimately, the reader will choose quality journalism." Rappler was successful with the adjustments. Not only were readers loyal, but Rappler's stories covering politicians and the war on drugs

also led to a changed and broadened perspective among the Filipino public on their President's dealings.

One of Rappler's stories that had a particular impact was an exclusive that documented the killing in August 2017 of 17-year-old Kian Delos Santos by three policemen, who were later found guilty in court. It was the first conviction of abusive policemen in Duterte's war on drugs. When the president's public popularity ratings plummeted 18 points in April 2018, his own Chief Legal Counsel at the time, Salvador Panelo, suggested this was due to the public outrage at police brutality. Although this violence continued, Hofileña believes that due to their reporting, "some of the avid [Duterte] supporters found it a little bit more difficult to defend them."

“We're in touch with our readers, know what they want and how much they can take.

Within the niche Rappler has created for itself online, its investigative reporting thrives. "It's really about courage," Hofileña confirms. "Investigative stories require courage in any environment, more so this environment, where you have a president openly saying that journalists are corrupt and inviting violence."

Although there is a small investigative team of just five reporters, all of Rappler's reporters are encouraged to do investigative stories. "The assumption here is if you're a reporter at Rappler, you have the capacity or you have the potential to become an investigative reporter," Gloria confirms. Reporters are told right at the start that they will have to do breaking day-to-day reports and produce in-depth investigative stories, because that is Rappler's branding. And Rappler's veteran journalists confirm that their young reporters find personal fulfillment in doing so. "We're growing our own people and we're building for the future," reaffirms Ressa. "When we started out, we hired reporters as young as 23, fresh out of college or with just a few years work experience," remembers Hofileña, today in charge of training and head of the Investigative Desk. "They were very open, willing to learn and had no bad habits. And it was easy to train them. Now they're encouraged, they're emboldened; they're empowered to do these stories."

Social media — Rappler's friend and foe

Apart from the security guard at the front door, the first line of protection is in the digital sphere as Rappler has been the target of online trolling. Digital security consultants brief staff on a regular basis on how to protect digital assets and digital contacts. They also make sure that Rappler's journalists know how to communicate safely online with their sources, what chat



Ensuring viability: Maria Ressa

app to use and how to clean the computer when there is a raid. "We're also asked to sweep the office for bugs every now and then, we don't talk about sensitive issues and there's no [fixed] equipment here," adds Gloria. All employees bring in laptops that can be quickly packed up.

Rappler's founders and journalists have been targeted with hate messages, especially after they published a three-part series in October 2016 on what later became known as 'patriotic trolling'—online hate speech sponsored by the State to silence anyone who was not in line with the government's official version of events. Ressa alone received up to 90 hate messages per hour, ranging from threats of rape to ridiculing her looks. But Rappler has not solely been on the defensive and has taken the problem head on. "If you were getting attacked as much as we were you have to understand it," says Ressa. "We learned about it by living in it." And so Rappler employees pulled together and designed their own database to track where the attacks were coming from and where and how they are spreading on social media. The results found that the Duterte administration was employing an army of trolls on social media to harass dissenters, including Rappler reporters, and embolden members of the public to do the same. Rappler's findings match those of a 2017 Oxford University study comparing organized social media manipulation in 28 countries, which found that the Duterte administration spent US \$200,000 on hundreds of "keyboard trolls" hired to spread propaganda and attack political enemies during the presidential campaign and after he was elected in



Always ready to pack up: Rappler's newsroom

2016. Rappler's journalists realized that these investigations into the links between social media networks and fake accounts spreading misinformation are also proof of the abuse of power.

“The business model has to constantly evolve to better understand our readers.”

“Facebook is where [the trolls] attack,” says Ressa, identifying that the social network that was the first distribution platform for Rappler has turned into the main source of online threats. David Kaye, the United Nations special rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, stated in the Washington Post that Facebook bears some responsibility for Rappler's and Ressa's predicament as it has failed to adhere to its policies and remove false and violence-inciting accounts in a timely manner, even after Rappler repeatedly asked them to—Ressa began engaging with Facebook about this as early as October 2016. Back then, Rappler had already identified 26 Facebook accounts, reaching more than three million users, that were spreading false news and inciting violence. “We haven't lost the wonder of the internet but I think the biggest problem right now is that you have so many actors in this sphere but there are no principles that we all abide by. The internet changed the world fundamentally,” Ressa says.

And she sees an even greater threat: “Globally, democracy has been rolled back by cheap armies on social media. Technology companies handle the algorithms that now power our lives. It's been weaponized by authoritarian-style leaders with the willing consent of the guys who built it.” But Rappler is not turning its back on technology nor on social networks—quite the opposite. “Right now, we're not just fighting a government. We're trying to use technology in a way that can help preserve democracy. If the bad guys can use it, why can't we use these networks as force for good?” Ressa asks.

To that end, in April 2018, Rappler joined forces with Facebook in an attempt to fight back against the attacks on the social media platform, exposing fake accounts controlled by a network of Duterte supporters. Together with the independent Filipino non-profit media organization Vera Files, they review news stories on Facebook, check their facts, and rate their accuracy, aiming to identify and prevent disinformation from spreading on the platform. “I think change is starting to happen and we're part of those discussions. That's what's exciting now because I think everything we do matters now. And that's really empowering,” Ressa states.

An agile business model

Rappler Holdings is in its majority owned by journalists. Investors can buy shares, but internal rules ensure that the existing



© L. Bitling

Investigative journalism meets creativity

shareholders have first dibs at buying those shares. “Assuming one shareholder decides to sell his share, existing shareholders have the right of first refusal. Should an outsider be interested in buying shares, a majority of shareholders must approve. Equally, you cannot sell your shares without the approval of the others,” says Gloria. Long time Rappler employees have also been offered a stock option.

“ In a difficult political climate, we thought what else can we do to grow the business? We have data science and even membership—these are things that we could sell. So, we’re thinking of other options... we need to get excited again for new things.

The media organization relies for revenue on advertising, grants, providing data insight, and membership. In the past years, Rappler has diversified its business model in such a way that it no longer solely relies on one revenue stream such as advertising. Moreover, there is a Chinese wall between journalistic operations and business services, such as offering PR videos to commercial clients. As of 2016, they hit near breakeven financially—the same year that they came under attack by the Duterte

government. According to Gloria, the business model has to constantly evolve to better understand the readers: “They’re staying longer on this site based on the data we have. We’re not a mass-market news organization so we know that they come to Rappler because of the brand of Rappler and that’s the kind of readership that we want.”

Hofileña is certain that their high-quality investigative reports, checking on abuses of power by the government, as well as breaking exclusives lie at the heart of their success. And Sheila Coronel, former investigative reporter in the Philippines and now Director of the Center for Investigative Journalism at Columbia University, adds, “Rappler is the canary in the gold mine. It’s at the cutting edge of digital and muckraking journalism in the Philippines.”

Ironically, it is Duterte’s attacks that have given Rappler an enhanced global profile. And its founding members are turning the pressure against them into new opportunities. “In a difficult political climate, we thought what else can we do to grow the business? We have data science and even membership—these are things that we could sell. So, we’re thinking of other options. We’re seven years old—we need to get excited again for new things,” says Gloria. When the government revoked Rappler’s licence, it turned to crowdfunding. In early 2019, it introduced RapplerPlus, a membership program where subscribers get exclusive access to analytic pieces and commentaries by Ressa, expert forums, workshops and investigative reports.

Looking forward

While Rappler may have carved out a unique space for investigative journalism to grow in the Philippines, it also welcomes competition. “The landscape and this regime are going to make it difficult for a competitor to grow,” admits Gloria. “Competition is good and there is a lot of talent here, a lot of investment in Asia.” Rappler also has a bureau in Jakarta, Indonesia, and a dedicated section on its website. “We’ve always wanted to go regional to make our presence felt in Southeast Asia,” she adds.

“**Rappler’s journalists realized that these investigations into the links between social media networks and fake accounts spreading misinformation are also proof of the abuse of power.**”

Even under these difficult circumstances—or possibly because of the way Rappler has reacted to them—the future looks challenging but promising. “Rappler is unique because it is not connected to the big business houses that own and run legacy media. That gives it more independence and credibility,” believes Coronel. “It can afford to stand up to Duterte.” And Gloria adds that especially in a country like the Philippines, quality media holds an important role: “In a country with weak political institutions, a weak judiciary, you need the watchdog to speak the truth. Since the colonial years, the Philippine media has played a critical role in either bringing down a dictatorship or the transitioning of a new one.” And she is certain that Duterte underestimates the nature of the Philippine media, which she says is inherently activist. “Rappler is led by women who were products of the revolution. We left college when [Ferdinand] Marcos was ousted so we benefited from political freedoms that came about after the end of that dictatorship. And we know how to lose it—so we’re not going to,” says Gloria.

Ressa is also certain that the current problems can be fixed—with the help of technology, support from the international community and, most of all, their own dedication: “When you live in the world of data the way that we do, you understand the way the world works in a whole different way. I know that this will be fixed. So, we weather it,” she says. And on a personal level, she adds: “Ducking now at the tail-end of my career would make everything I have lived for and worked for meaningless. So, the time to take a stand is now. We are Rappler. This is what we do.”

Author

Lynzy Billing is a British feature and investigative journalist based in Manila, Philippines, photographing and reporting on sociocultural, economic and political issues in the region with a particular focus on women’s rights.



Tempo | Indonesia

Integrity Worth Defending

In its 48-year existence, Indonesia's Tempo weekly magazine has proven itself a survivor. Amidst times of political oppression and sustained attacks from powerful business interests, it has always found a way to deliver its investigative stories. The secret: a strong spirit of editorial independence, thorough training of young journalists and a clear role within today's information ecosystem.

As the news agendas of other Indonesian media are becoming more and more driven by advertising in the name of survival, Tempo insists on “the firewall” — the separation between newsroom and business divisions within the company. That attitude is an integral part of Tempo and has become a source of pride. It is shared by every single person in Tempo's newsroom — in its weekly magazine, daily newspaper and online edition. “We've always been trying to block those business-minded people so they cannot intervene in our newsroom,” says Abdul Manan, editor of the International Section. “That kind of [strong] character has been developed through the transfer of values in Tempo's newsroom, in our daily routine, in meetings, in conversations. The idea of (newsroom) independence has been inherited that way.”

There is one incident that Manan always remembers: In April 2006, Tempo published a series of investigative reports revealing a scandalous clause in a leasing agreement for a government asset in Jakarta between Indonesia's government and a private company, named The Hok Bing. In response to that report, The Hok Bing hired an advertising agency to place an advertorial in Tempo, denying Tempo's reports over eight pages. The price: five hundred million rupiah (about 31 250 Euros). Advertorials are not uncommon at Tempo, but in this case almost all of Tempo's newsroom staff were angry as they believed that their company was trying to make money from someone that was being investigated by its journalists. The staff openly protested, accusing Tempo of having sold off its integrity and independence for the sake of a profit.

Following an internal investigation, it became clear that the editor in charge was not able to see the ad material before it was published due to a computer error. Nonetheless, employees involved in the publishing of the advertorial both in the newsroom and in the Marketing Department were sanctioned by the management for their “recklessness”. Some staff even got their monthly salaries reduced. A week later, in an editorial piece the then editor in-chief apologized to readers for their carelessness in publishing that ad, confirming that Tempo had refused to accept payment for the advertorial.

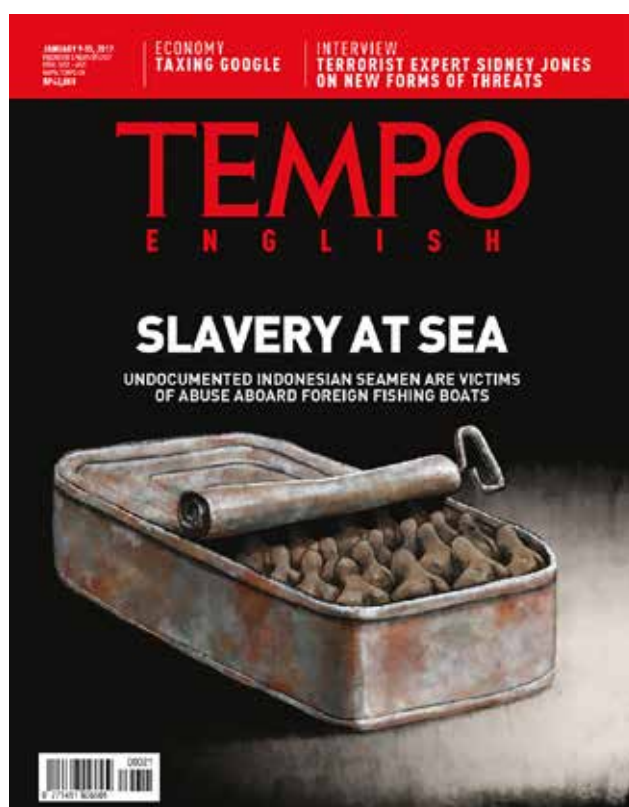
This definitive story has been passed on to younger generations at Tempo, giving a strong example to newsroom staff that Tempo's values can never be compromised.



Stubborn from the beginning

This spirit of editorial independence goes right back to the very birth of this media outlet. Tempo was established in Jakarta in 1971 by several writers, artists and journalists led by Goenawan Mohamad and Fikry Jufri who a year earlier had co-established the magazine Ekspres. Only six months later they were fired by the major shareholder of Ekspres because of an opinion piece written by Mohamad in other media that criticized a political event involving one of the shareholders. One of the guarantees Mohamad and Jufri asked of their investors in the weekly magazine Tempo was for the newsroom to be independent of any business or political interests. After a series of long discussions, all founding parties of Tempo agreed that editorial policies cannot be interfered with by the company.

“ One of the guarantees Mohamad and Jufri asked of their investors in the weekly magazine Tempo was for the newsroom to be independent of any business or political interests.



However, they still had to struggle with the authoritarian government. In 1982, Tempo was shut down by the government time and again after being accused of criticizing them. Only after confirming that they would stop did they get back their publishing permit. Nevertheless, Tempo still found means of publishing stories that dug deep, using investigative methods. In June 1994, when Tempo published a story about the government purchasing thirty-nine used warships from East Germany, the former GDR, President Suharto lost his patience with Tempo and decided that it should be shut down for good. Although Tempo brought the case to the Jakarta District Court and was found not guilty, the government appealed before the Supreme Court and it changed the verdict. All of Tempo's employees lost their jobs. Some of them then chose to join other media companies, while others joined an underground publication, which included a semi-legal online outlet named Tempointeraktif.com, founded in 1995. When Suharto was forced to step down in May 1998, Tempo weekly magazine was reborn six months later and was welcomed back by a loyal readership.

The investigative breakthrough

For the founders of Tempo, stories are meant to provide background and context, not just describe events. They call it "stories behind the news." Based on this premise, reports in Tempo gradually turned more investigative. According to Wahyu Dhyatmika, a.k.a Komang, director and editor-in-chief of Tempo.co, this attitude has led Tempo's reporters to build lasting connections with high-ranking officials both in the government and the military, with businessmen, activists, whistle blowers, artists, and all kinds of sources.

This was also in-line with the interests of Tempo as a media corporation. But of course, these were two different sets of interests: while the newsroom needed confidential sources, Tempo's owners needed connections to secure the existence of Tempo as a media organization. "Since 1998, we have deliberately focused on publishing investigative stories. In the past we did that sporadically and we didn't have a special section for investigative reports," he says. The decision to focus on investigative and in-depth reports, Komang adds, was based on the fact that, following the departure of former president Suharto,

there was a relatively free flow of information and the government no longer restricted the media. But this also led to a lack of self-regulation and a situation that was labelled “information chaos,” since literally everyone—not just the media—eagerly circulated information, both good and false.

In this chaotic situation Tempo decided to follow its traditional path, focusing on in-depth journalism. “Why we chose that path? Because we believe we have competency in lengthy reports that give context, revealing truth behind news, and the era of press freedom gives us more space to do that,” says Komang. He also believes that this decision was key to Tempo becoming one of Indonesia’s leading magazines.

But threats still exist. While in the past the greatest of these came from the government, since the fall of the Suharto government it has been business people and politicians who have put pressure on Tempo. The worst case was in 2003, when the magazine was sued by businessman Tomy Winata after publishing an investigation that highlighted his involvement in the great fire of Tanah Abang, one of the biggest textile markets in Jakarta. Winata denied all accusations and filed a defamation lawsuit against Tempo for 400 billion rupiah, equivalent today to 25 million Euros. The case resulted in lengthy court sessions as well as constant intimidation—including physical attacks on Tempo staff from Winata’s men. It was even discussed in the House of Representatives, since Winata seemed likely to force Tempo into bankruptcy with his lawsuit. In the end, Tempo won the case in the Supreme Court in 2006.

“We believe we have competency in lengthy reports that give context, revealing truth behind news, and the era of press freedom gives us more space to do that.”

Since then, Tempo has been dealing with at least six lawsuits, all related to its in-depth and investigative reports. “We have never lost in court [in relation to our investigative reports], but still we’ve spent so much time and energy to fight against their lawsuits,” says Komang. He explains that all of Tempo’s investigative reports are checked by their lawyers to assess the possibility of a lawsuit. If there are flaws in the report, the investigation team will make corrections. According to Anton Septian, former staff member of the Investigation Section, now editor of the National Section—all stories in Tempo are fact-checked. This standard includes recorded interviews and documents from reporters, and a thorough legal assessment by editors, the editor-in-chief and a lawyer. Tempo is always prepared to fight in court if necessary; its company lawyers are supported by lawyers from Indonesia’s Press Legal Aid Foundation. “There are lawyers that are will-



From investigative reporter to editor of the National Section: Anton Septian

ing to help us pro bono in court,” says Komang, adding that this support is based on a common goal: the defense of press freedom in Indonesia.

Sensitive stories create personal risks

Aside from lawsuits, Tempo staff at times face intimidation, both mental and physical, from people unknown to them. In 2010, one of their staff was stabbed with a machete, there was an incident involving a molotov cocktail thrown into Tempo’s office, and intimidation by text message. All this happened after the magazine had published sensitive stories, including reports that revealed extraordinary amounts of money in the bank accounts of some high-ranking police officials, and the corruption of top-level politicians close to the president and among Indonesia’s football committee. Although there is a common understanding that investigative work is a high-risk activity, knowledge about safety in reporting activities has only recently been added to Tempo’s journalistic training, which new journalists receive based on the experiences of their seniors. Thus far, tips on survival and safety were only given to those who were sent to dangerous areas. “As far as I can recall, there is no particular safety training for us. But if there is a serious threat for one of our journalists, Tempo provides a safe house,” says Septian.

Reporters have developed their own ways of staying safe. Agung Sedayu, an editor for Tempo's daily, explains that he usually moves to rented accommodation in a particularly safe area, such as a military base, to cover his identity when working on an investigative report. He also keeps changing phone numbers to avoid phone tapping or phone tracking. After the investigation is published, he will change his looks with a new haircut or a change in facial hair. He also limits his activities on social media. "I do all this mainly to keep my family safe from dangerous people. However, so far, me and my family have never experienced trauma caused by my journalistic work," says Sedayu. To deal with trauma, Tempo has hired a psychologist who has been embedded in the HR department. Her main job is to detect any need for psychological support based on peer reports.

“One of the results of our evaluation was the program of never-ending capacity building for newsroom staff.

Editor-in-chief Komang says that sometimes threats are made because there are flaws in reports caused by a lack of knowledge on the part of journalists, such as their lack of understanding of institutional structures and officials, data accuracy and so on. "All of the weaknesses have always been evaluated both by the newsroom and the management," he confirms. "One of the results of our evaluation was the program of never-ending capacity building for newsroom staff."

Setting up a new generation

In order to join Tempo's newsroom, reporters have to complete a two-year apprenticeship, which includes weekly classes as well as assisting senior reporters in their fieldwork to get data and information. "Basically, we have three phases of training reporter apprentices: the first nine months for basic training, the second nine months for advanced reporting and writing, and the last six months to prove themselves whether they will meet our standard or not," says Septian. Upon a successful evaluation by Tempo editors, taking into account past achievements in class as well as their journalistic work, reporters will be appointed as full-time newsroom staff. They also have the option to become editor's apprentices—a prospect which those working in the investigative section can take on earlier than their colleagues from other sections. According to Komang, this has proven to be a valuable incentive for reporters to focus on investigative work, as they do not get paid more than other reporters. Moreover, only those journalists who do well usually make it to the investigative team in the first place.



To finance investigative projects, the Investigative Section—comprised of at least one team, a managing editor, an editor, and two reporters—has to deliver its proposals to an annual managerial meeting before the beginning of the year. "If for the next year we have a plan to produce twelve investigative reports, but the company budget just doesn't fit with our plan, perhaps we will cut the plan with only five or six investigative reports," says Komang. There are requirements for reports being labeled as investigative: The topics must be relevant to the general public, there are already findings or initial evidence of wrongdoing, the wrongdoing has to have happened systematically, and to have had broad impact, such as human trafficking, corruption or large-scale human rights violations. These requirements were set up based on editors' experiences but also by following the development in methods of investigation that their journalists brought back from international meetings and workshops.

“To deal with trauma, Tempo has hired a psychologist who has been embedded in the HR department. Her main job is to detect any need for psychological support based on peer reports.



When gossip meets investigations

The “stories behind the news” concept offered by Tempo since the early 1970’s was applauded by Indonesian audiences, especially the middle class. Some of them even saw Tempo as a gossip magazine. Why? Because Tempo revealed many hidden aspects in the lives of the elites: their wealth, their political involvement, even the number of wives some had. And readers love to know about the lives of important people. With those stories, Tempo had strengthened its grip on Indonesian readers, since there were no strong competitors in the magazine market during this time and no other media in Indonesia dared to touch hard topics involving the government or the military.

“The “stories behind the news” concept offered by Tempo since the early 1970’s was applauded by Indonesian audiences, especially the middle class. Some of them even saw Tempo as a gossip magazine.

Tempo gained significant profits both from subscribers and advertising at an amazing speed. In only one decade it became one of the richest media companies in Indonesia. In 1986 they moved their office from the outskirts of Jakarta to the business center of the city, buying a nine-story-building. By the

time Tempo was re-established in 1998, the magazine was still number one in Indonesia according to Komang, but was facing fierce competition from dailies, broadcast and online media in gaining revenues from the market.

“But there is a deadlier threat to the business: advertisers imposing a boycott on ads in Tempo.

Starting from 2004, people who were pictured badly or subject to damaging revelations in the magazine started to strike back. The reasons were never clear to the editors, Komang says, but he suspects that there were two main factors: Firstly, Indonesia’s press is subject to both Criminal Law and Indonesia’s Press Law, which allows those who object to journalistic products to file defamation lawsuits. Secondly, following the fall of President Suharto, there was no single actor regulating the system, including the press, and this created opportunity for people with money and leverage to exercise their power against the press by influencing legal institutions.

But there is a deadlier threat to the business: advertisers imposing a boycott on ads in Tempo. This includes big companies like the government-owned oil company Pertamina and Bank Mandiri, the largest bank owned by the government,

and has resulted in a loss in profits that is estimated at billions of rupiah. Still, the Board of Directors never pushed the newsroom to “loosen” its editorial policies: That initial agreement between the founders of Tempo and its investors has been upheld throughout Tempo’s history spanning almost five decades. Even with changes in ownership and management, newsroom independence has been defended by a Board of Directors and a Board of Trustees that include people from a journalistic background, such as founders Goenawan Mohamad and Fikri Jufri as well as former editors-in-chief Bambang Harymurti and Toriq Hadad.

“In Tempo’s newsroom, journalists from every section are encouraged to use investigative methods in their daily work.”

According to Komang, the newsroom proposed various solutions to deal with the fall in revenues, including publishing investigative reports on their online platform, Tempo.co. This was set up in 2013 as an initial step to get online subscribers. Then Tempo noticed that with each investigation published online, they gained millions of extra pageviews. “Now, on average, every month we gain more than 100 million pageviews on Tempo.co,” Komang confirms. This for him means hope of finding a new business model that is in line with Tempo’s ideals: An income for the outlet, with its focus on investigative reports, based on online subscriptions and membership. “We are still trying. I’ve heard that the New York Times’ revenues from membership have overtaken its revenues from ads. If we can do that, we will get more freedom,” he says.

Spreading the tradition

In Tempo’s newsroom, journalists from every section are encouraged to use investigative methods in their daily work. In 2012, Agung Sedayu, a reporter from the Arts Section, voiced the suspicion that there were a large number of fake paintings in famous galleries and was assigned to dig deeper into this story. “I worked with journalists from the Arts Section and also with our correspondents in different areas,” he explains. “We entered the underground business of fake paintings as I went undercover as an art trader.” In so doing, he found that fake paintings had been sold to galleries in Indonesia at a price of 100 million rupiah, equivalent to 6180 Euros apiece. He met with artists and dealers to get first-hand information and went on to describe how they copied the painting style of famous painters, then sold the results to galleries, claiming those paintings were newly discovered works of certain famous painters.

Tempo is also sharing the tradition and methods of investigative reporting with other media. A program called “Investigation with Tempo” encourages journalists from other Indonesian media to collaborate when investigating relevant topics. Those who are willing to join the program are required to propose topics. The accepted fellows will be trained by Tempo’s journalists before joining the ad-hoc investigative team. This program is funded by the Tempo Institute and international research and media development organizations, and includes mentoring by Tempo’s editors and a stipend for the duration of the investigation.

Even before this program, there had been several collaborations with other media, such as with The Reporter from Taiwan in investigating the enslavement of Indonesian workers on Taiwanese ships. Tempo also collaborated with Malaysiakini in investigating the inhumane working conditions of Indonesian female workers in Malaysia. And the outlet was part of the international network that published the “Panama Papers.” Furthermore, Tempo recently collaborated with other media in establishing the online platform, Indonesialeaks, to give whistle blowers a safe space to leak documents.

The future

Looking at the strong position of Tempo’s newsroom, it seems safe to assume that the investigative reporting tradition started by its founders will continue for a long time. Businesswise, Tempo is declining—just like many other media corporations in Indonesia—but there are efforts to think creatively to help the corporation survive. “To know the result of what we’re doing now, you just cannot judge us today,” says Komang. “It will be seen in the near future. But clearly, we never have any intention to change our tradition in delivering investigative reports, because that is Tempo. Independence and integrity are things that are worth defending.”

Author
Zaky Yamani is a freelance journalist and editor based in Indonesia. He has published two novels, among them ‘Family, Blood and Inherited Sin’.



Europe

Hungary

Hungary has a population of about 10 million people. After decades of communist rule following World War II, the Central European country became a parliamentary democracy in 1989 and a member of the European Union in 2004. Recently, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his right-wing government have initiated several legal and constitutional changes limiting the autonomy and rights of independent institutions and civil society. The country's media publish in the official language, Hungarian, the majority being in the hands of the government. The Internet is the second most important source of news for Hungarians, after TV. With around 99 percent of inhabitants aged 15 and above are literate. Nearly 77 percent of the population regularly accesses the internet. Hungary is ranked 87 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling 14 places from the previous year.

SLOVAKIA

HUNGARY

UKRAINE

SLOVENIA

CROATIA

BOSNIA
HERZE-
GOVINA

SERBIA

ROMANIA

MONTENEGRO

MAZEDONIA

Serbia

Serbia is located in the west-central Balkans. As part of former Yugoslavia, from 1991 to 2001 the country was involved in the deadliest European conflict since World War II—a conflict that was fuelled by ethnic tensions and a rise in nationalism. Today, Serbia is a parliamentary republic and aims to join the European Union in 2025. It has a population of around 7 million people. Around 99 percent, its literacy rate is very high. The official language is Serbian, which is also spoken in the neighboring countries. Television is the most popular media. Around 72 percent of the population has access to the Internet. Serbia is ranked 90 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling 14 places from the previous year due to rising threats towards independent journalists and increasing media concentration.

Atlatszo.hu | Hungary

An online newsroom nestled “in the hood”

Atlatszo.hu knows that high quality investigations are what attract its audience. Amidst political attacks, it has managed to fund nearly half of its operations via donations from readers—so successfully, that its competitors are now aiming for the same.

On the top floor of a centuries-old Budapest building converted to host several flats resides the newsroom of Atlatszo.hu. Anita Kőműves, a journalist in her thirties, opens the door secured by a code. The office is situated in an alternative cultural center called Aurora in one of the poorest areas in town, the ill-famed 8th district of Budapest. Numerous NGOs are headquartered on the same floor, and the café and a dance floor downstairs get busy on weekends. “I like to call that a punk office. But we had to introduce more security recently,” explains the journalist, indicating that the free spirit the office is proposing is in stark contrast to their reality. She opens a small room decorated by the various awards the online-platform has received since it was founded in 2011. This includes the 2015 Index on Censorship Freedom of Expression Award for Digital Activism and the German Theodor Heuss Medaille, also in 2015, which is awarded to promote civic initiative and moral courage.

Apart from one other monitor, there is only Anita Kőműves’s computer on the big oval table. She has been a journalist for more than a decade, starting at a college newspaper in the small town of Kiskunfélegyháza and later, having discovered a taste for investigative work, joining the foreign desk of Népszabadság, Hungary’s biggest newspaper until it was closed down in 2016. There she worked as part of the investigative team, uncovering corruption linked to Viktor Orbán’s elite. The following year, she joined Atlatszo.hu.

As her eight full-time colleagues work mostly outside the Atlatszo.hu office, she comes to their newsroom for the weekly editorial meeting or other work-related events. “I do feel part of the team even if not all of us are sitting in the same room all the time,” she says. Two members of the staff, in fact, work from abroad, from Switzerland and Spain.

In the top 10 of Hungarian news websites

Meaning ‘transparent’ in Hungarian, Atlatszo.hu is both an investigative media organization and a watchdog NGO that promotes transparency, accountability and freedom of information in Hungary, encouraging the participation of the general public. Composed of several blogs, Atlatszo.hu also operates a Tor-based anonymous whistleblowing platform, a freedom of information (FOI) request generator, where templates and search engines are available for anyone seeking to file a FOI request with public bodies, a crowdsourced platform to report



daily corruption, and an independent blogging platform for other NGOs, independent journalists and experts.

The main website covers corruption, campaign financing, financial abuse in public procurement procedures, infrastructure projects and EU funding, as well as environmental abuse and human rights violations. Over the years, Atlatszo.hu has grown into a respected independent media platform—it was quoted more than 3500 times by other Hungarian media outlets in 2018, according to Atlatszo.hu’s research. It publishes in Hungarian and translates its major stories into English, but its target audience, ranging from Budapest top-university graduates to rural and small town dwellers, remains Hungarians living in Hungary.

Atlatszo.hu is one of three leading Hungarian media outlets that publish investigative stories. It operates in the specific context of Viktor Orbán’s conservative state-captured Hungary, where the media are officially still free, especially online, but their access is uneven: the power of the government influences the way news is produced and distributed. In today’s Hungary, no journalist has been jailed and anyone can theoretically set up a new media outlet. But the media business environment has silenced several independent media establishments in the



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Entering Atlatzo.hu's 'punk' office

past few years: Titles have gone bankrupt or changed ownership from one day to another. Some oligarchs eventually bought them up and turned them into government mouthpieces or closed them down.

“The outlet is financed partly by the public: About 3500 regular donors transfer a monthly subscription.

More than 400 pro-government media outlets are now concentrated under the custody of one single foundation, giving the government an absolute hold on public media. The market is strongly distorted by the imbalance of state advertising distribution in favor of loyal outlets. A few months ago, in its annual country profile for Hungary, Freedom House wrote: “Due to support from the deeply biased public media and important acquisitions in the television, online, and print segments, pro-government outlets have come to dominate the media market to an overwhelming degree, unimaginable even a year earlier.” In Atlatzo.hu’s case, this means that its stories are rarely covered by the mainstream press. Therefore, the only valid distribution remains via partner media and social media.

A strong legal team was set up early on, consisting of two staff lawyers and Atlatzo.hu co-founder Csaba Tordai, a well-known

constitutional lawyer in the country. They are supported by a network of volunteers to help prevent major lawsuits. All articles that are deemed ‘risky’ are assessed by the team, which gives an expert opinion of what would stand up in court—and what might indeed be risky.

Atlatzo.hu publishes about four stories a day on its various blogs and up to four bigger stories a week on the main website. It gets 20 000-30 000 unique visitors a month in total. According to Mérték, an independent press freedom watchdog, and opinion pollster Medián Research, Atlatzo.hu content was read by approximately 12 percent of the total Hungarian population at least once a week in 2018. The same study ranks Atlatzo.hu the 8th best-known website among Internet readers in Hungary. Mostly composed of professional journalists, along with subcontracted and volunteer video journalists, and legal and IT experts, Atlatzo.hu staff rely on freelancers, including a drone specialist who played an important role in the coverage of one of their best-known and most widely read recent articles: “Viktor Orbán, the private jet, the luxury yacht, and the Mészáros family—we know where they spent their holiday this summer.”

The content on Atlatzo.hu is free of charge. The outlet is financed partly by the public: About 3500 regular donors transfer a monthly subscription of 1000 forint, equivalent to 3.30 Euros. This accounts for one third of Atlatzo.hu’s annual budget of



Part of the ups and downs from the beginning:
founder and editor-in-chief Tamás Bodoky

about 300 000 Euros. Roughly another 17 percent of the budget comes from the 1 percent personal income tax Hungarians can dedicate to a non-profit organization or to a church in their yearly tax declaration, an important revenue source for NGOs in the country. The rest of the budget comes from institutional donors such as the Open Society Foundations or the Fritt Ord Foundation from Norway.

From freedom of information requests to breaking scandals

Atlatzso.hu regularly files freedom of information requests that are sometimes denied by Hungarian authorities but then (and very often successfully) challenged in court. The platform has been increasingly involved in cross border stories, collaborating among others with the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), a consortium of investigative outlets, and with Vsquare.org, a Visegrad/Central-European network of independent media outlets that runs cross-border investigations.

Every year, Atlatzso.hu manages to publish a couple of stories that strike a chord, being widely shared on social media and sometimes triggering reactions from the Hungarian authorities, be that from the government or the general prosecutor's office. Did these successful stories bring about any change in

the management or editorial choices of Atlatzso.hu? Did they help win more readers and gain new income sources? How did this success impact the personal lives of team members? One such landmark story for both Atlatzso.hu and the public was the scandal of Elios, a company partly owned by Viktor Orbán's then son-in-law, which was first published in 2014. Then, in the run-up to the 2018 general election, several articles appeared in the national media related to Elios after OLAF, the European Anti-Fraud office, published a report citing evidence of "serious irregularities" and "conflict of interest" in contracts the company won for providing public lighting in the country. It is not known if OLAF used Atlatzso.hu's report but "back then, we said OLAF should have a look because the company was getting so many suspicious contracts," summarizes Tamás Bodoky, Atlatzso.hu's founder and manager.

"You're excited when you start working on those stories. Then there is the day before publication, you're like, oh something might come tomorrow," explains Anita Kőműves, who was also part of the team that worked on the disclosures, published in September 2018, that members of the Hungarian elite—including Viktor Orbán himself—had used a luxury yacht and private jet registered abroad over the summer. "When I got to read the story, I was like 'ok', but when I got to the point when Orbán appeared in person I realized... oh, people will care! And, indeed, it was a big one!" So much so that pro-government media started a smear campaign against Tamás Bodoky. "We didn't see any

big change in the way our team works after this story or previous similar big ones. But after the general elections of 2018, won by Viktor Orbán's coalition, allowing him to start a third consecutive term, we were in a bad mood. We doubted that our work had any impact," explains Kőműves, who joined *Atlatzso.hu* in 2017.

"After this story, the whole team got its enthusiasm back. The euphoria is gone now but the morale is still higher than it was before." Attila Bátorfy, a visual data journalist for *Atlatzso.hu*, part of the brand new visual-story team, was closely involved in the investigation as part of a team comprising a lead journalist and a photojournalist. He also noticed higher productivity. "Everyone started to publish after that story!" he smiles. "We enjoyed the popularity of the story. We came up with follow-up stories." Krisztina Zala, who works remotely from Zürich on *Atlatzso.hu*'s finances and administration, and as a project manager, sounds a more cautious note: "I'm sure it helps productivity but then it's short. Frustration has a longer impact on motivation than success."

When success is hard to predict

The journalists at *Atlatzso.hu* are sometimes the first to be surprised when a story takes off. "Among us, nobody really expected such an impact from the yacht and plane article," notes Kőműves, who's also in charge of *Atlatzso.hu*'s English content. On the other hand, she realizes that not everything their reporters believe will have an impact will get a strong reaction from their audience. "I wrote about this pro-Russian US congressman, a good friend of the Hungarian government. It turns out this sketchy figure is helping Hungarians in Washington but hardly anyone paid attention."

“When readership goes up, micro donations go up.

"Sometimes, also, it's just as if we are a little ahead. It takes some time for a story to be shared," she reflects. Reports with a strong impact can take *Atlatzso.hu*'s journalists onto new ground. This was especially the case after the September story about Viktor Orbán's summer plans. "We started to monitor more planes and other Hungarian journalists started that, too. But our editorial treatment is the same as before," summarizes visual data expert Bátorfy. "Big successes shaped my perception of what the audience finds interesting," notes editor-in-chief Bodoky. "I would have never thought private planes were that interesting five or ten years ago, but it's much more powerful than stolen billions." A former scientist with a degree in communication, Bodoky has been a journalist since 1996. He was part of the investigative teams at several publications, including the weekly *Magyar Narancs*, where his beat was science and technology. He has won numerous awards, including

a Hungarian investigative award (Göbölös Soma Prize) for this coverage of police brutality during the massive Hungarian demonstrations against the left-wing government in 2006.

Even though he had introduced data visualization earlier, leading to a dedicated team this fall, its importance has become even more apparent since September. "Now we do a lot of drone footage especially on corruption stories. A text-based article doesn't work anymore," Bodoky resumes. The same is true for the foreign attention that fuels the need for an English version. "Until this story, we were not really quoted by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, the *Washington Post*, or the *New York Times*. Now we are getting noticed by quality journalists," Bátorfy points out.

Good stories bring money

Another important consequence of successful stories is the financial input they are bringing. "In October, *Atlatzso.hu* got more readers and received 2 million forint more in micro donations than in September," stresses its founder. "When readership goes up, micro donations go up. But it's something we've experienced for a long time: people tend to reward the scandals and the good articles." And Krisztina Zala adds: "Previously, people sent us a donation once after a big story, and now they have started a monthly donation, that's new."

However, big stories did not induce any changes in *Atlatzso.hu*'s organizational set-up, nor did it lead to more staff being hired. "I think we should change the management when it's a failure, not when it's a success," Bodoky emphasizes. "*Atlatzso.hu* has grown quite linearly since it started with only one journalist, myself, in 2011, roughly incorporating a new journalist a year."

To keep the financial momentum, *Atlatzso.hu* uses social media tools such as memes and banners to "remind the readers we broke the story." After the OLAF story, it had a banner on Facebook saying, "If you want OLAF to investigate Elios you should donate and we make sure it happens!". "Usually that works — we get more Paypal transfers," confirms Bodoky.

“Bodoky, however, is a staunch believer of ‘any publicity is good publicity’ and thus thinks that smear campaigns, too, are helpful, no matter how nasty they are.

The big stories have also had little impact on the personal lives of *Atlatzso.hu*'s team members overall. They all knew what they signed up for and they have never feared for themselves. Their family members, too, are all supportive. But being a journalist



Atlatszo.hu's office, Budapest

for an investigative media organization does not automatically mean that you gain personal recognition. "It's only your journalist colleagues that congratulate you for the stories you break. The public doesn't notice it was you," laughs Kőműves. Interestingly enough, one member of the team decided to give up journalism a few months ago as a result of the re-election of Viktor Orbán in April to open a restaurant. "I guess he had been doing the job for too long," comments Kőműves.

Tamás Bodoky's enjoyment of breaking major scandals is also much more contained as he was recently put in the spotlight by pro-government media; he found himself being portrayed as an agent of Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros, the founder of the Open Society Foundations, who has been vilified by the Orbán government for years now. The journalist was accused of conspiring against Hungary's national interests—a direct result of the plane and yacht story. "I don't really have that moment when I am happy, it's stressful. You can expect this government to retaliate. When you break a scandal, you get much more vulnerable. You never know when the nasty stuff will happen, I am in a constant nervous state of mind, much less open to new things, because it might be a trap," he says. "My parents are proud of my work but they don't like those smear campaigns, their pro-government friends always argue with them. After that September smear campaign, when I went to my summer house, people asked me: 'How come you're not in prison, we saw you on TV, you did something wrong!'"

Bodoky, however, is a staunch believer of 'any publicity is good publicity' and thus thinks that smear campaigns, too, are helpful, no matter how nasty they are. The founder of Atlatszo.hu has not taken any holidays since he founded the media outlet and is quite torn about it. "I should go on holiday for a longer period. But I'm afraid we'd go bankrupt if I leave for six months."

Limited in its growth

An unexpected consequence of Atlatszo.hu's success in today's Hungary might be the fact that sources have become scarcer. "Recently, one of my sources said that he can't give his name because he would be fired from his company as Atlatszo.hu is considered anti-government," Anita Kőműves points out. Additionally, more successful reports no longer translate into exponential growth of Atlatszo.hu. "We have reached a limit now, we won't grow without more marketing tools," Bodoky explains. "Practically all independent media started to crowd-fund now in Hungary and we are worried that it will lead to a decrease in our subscriber base." In Hungary, indeed, with an average net wage of less than 500 euro, there are not that many people willing to donate. "It's like a competition for the remaining pool of subscribers," says Bodoky, who is also worried about the consequences of the move of Soros' Open Society Foundations to relocate its headquarters from Budapest to Berlin, as a result of Hungarian laws passed to restrict NGO activities. "I'm definitely worried we won't get the same level of support," he concludes.

“We have reached a limit now, we won't grow without more marketing tools.”

Nevertheless, Krisztina Zala believes that there is still a market Atlatszo.hu can tap into: "Local newspapers are for most of them not independent anymore. It's a big readership that needs content! We have to offer more local content to readers living in the countryside and have to move these readers online."

Author

Helene Bienvenue is a photojournalist, documentary filmmaker and world traveler based between Budapest, Paris and the rest of the world. A French born freelancer, she's worked with the New York Times, Al-Jazeera, Le Figaro. She loves telling 'the unknown and the little known'.



KRIK | Serbia

Investigating the root problems of Serbian society

Recognized abroad, threatened at home: Journalists of the Serbian Crime and Corruption Reporting Network, KRIK, hope for sustainability and dream of expansion, but a hostile climate created by the authorities works against them.

While on a short vacation outside Belgrade, Dragana Pećo received news that her apartment had been ransacked, her clothes had been thrown out of the wardrobe and the garbage can spilled. “Someone had busted the lock and fixed it back up, so from the outside it looked like nothing was wrong with it, but when you grabbed the doorknob, it fell off,” Pećo says. Although her fiancé had left his phone, laptop and iPod in the apartment, the burglars only focused on Pećo’s belongings, throwing them around. Nothing seemed to have been stolen from their home. It was her fiancé who discovered the break-in on July 7, 2017, a couple of days before Pećo returned from the trip. He alerted the police.

“KRIK hopes to eventually achieve viability through crowdfunding, but international grants remain their main lifeline in a country where highest officials and pro-government media routinely tell the public that professional journalists are working against the state, labelling them liars.

As time passes and the crime remains unsolved, the lack of any progress in the investigation makes Pećo increasingly certain that the break-in was related to her work as an investigative journalist for KRIK. Since it was established in 2015, KRIK has uncovered many corruption scandals involving high-ranking state officials and representatives of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, led by Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić.

Pećo is one of the organization’s six founding members—almost all of them veteran journalists from the Centre for Investigative Journalism of Serbia, CINS. After leaving CINS, an established media outlet in its own right, they founded KRIK to create their own newsroom with a remit to focus on crime and corruption at the highest level, says KRIK journalist and project coordinator Jelena Vasić. “We are narrowly focused on organized crime and corruption while [other investigative outlets] have a different approach, investigating systemic problems like legislature,” Vasić says. Rather than focusing on a topic, she adds, KRIK zones in on the protagonists of their stories by investigating the person behind an act of corruption or a crime.

This is reflected in the look of KRIK’s website: most illustrations depict the person who is at the center of the story. These illustrations also give their website a unique and instantly visually recognizable look. Photos are only used if they prove part of the story—like a high-ranking official pictured at a football match with convicted criminals. Besides investigative stories, visitors can find databases on the properties of Serbian politicians and on mafia killings in Serbia and Montenegro, interviews with anti-corruption fighters and prosecutors, as well as blogs written by activists and occasionally by KRIK journalists themselves.

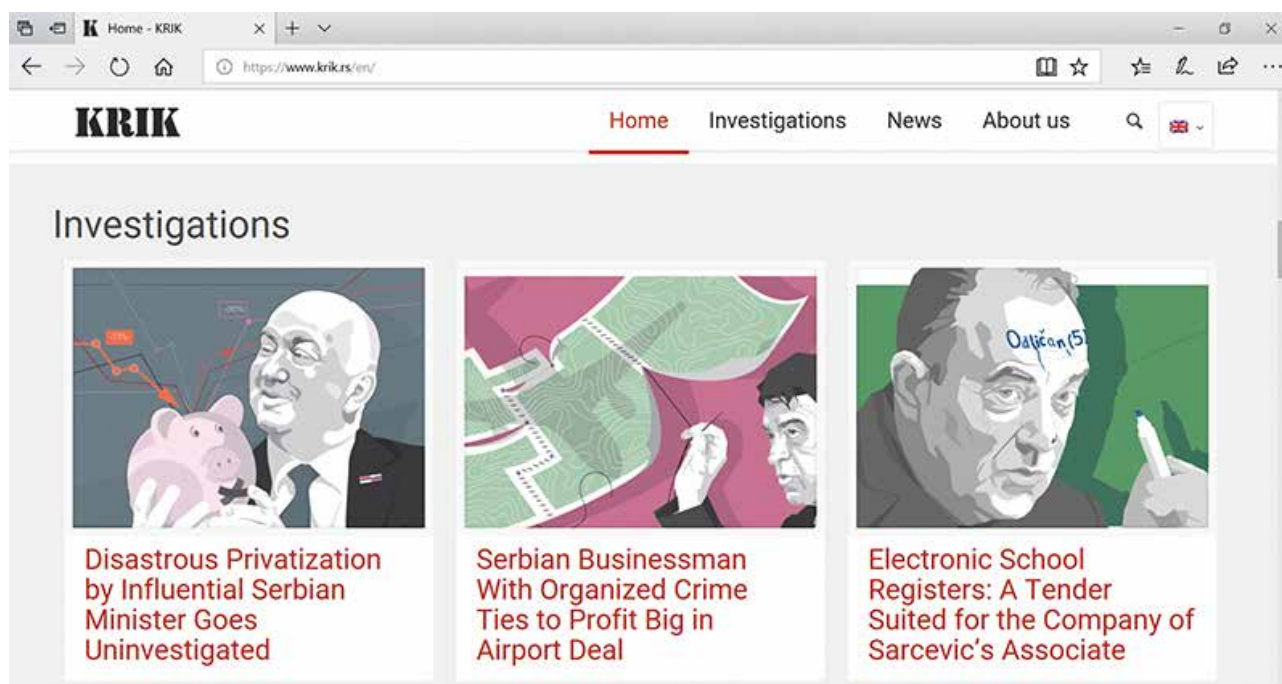
It is this focus that separates KRIK from other investigative organizations, such as the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), the Serbian Center for Investigative Journalism (CINS), or the websites Insajder and Pistaljka. KRIK hopes to eventually achieve viability through crowdfunding, but international grants remain their main lifeline in a country where highest officials and pro-government media routinely tell the public that professional journalists are working against the state, labelling them liars.

Humble beginnings

KRIK journalists operate out of an unassuming residential building near Belgrade’s downtown Slavija square. Investigative reporters pop in throughout the day, never keeping the same routine. Journalists working on daily news come and go from the Belgrade Higher Court, where organized crime trials take place. Journalists working for KRIK’s fact-checking website RasKRIKavanje are often the first to arrive, sifting through morning papers full of propaganda and sometimes hilarious misinformation. “We can often hear them cracking with laughter,” Jelena Vasić confides.



One of KRIK’s founders: investigative reporter Dragana Pećo



She recalls how KRIK staff worked without salaries in the first months after the organization was established in April 2015. Initial support came from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (OCCRP), the international organization that several KRIK journalists, including editor-in-chief Stevan Dojčinović, worked for. Dojčinović, who started writing his own fanzines about punk music whilst still in high school, interviewing bands and musicians, decided to become an investigative journalist at the age of 18 when he read a thoroughly researched book about the 2003 assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjic. Since then, he has uncovered numerous scandals and won several awards, including the European Press Prize and the Global Shining Light Award in 2015.

OCCRP gave KRIK a grant to help them in the first five months of operations, but membership in the network came with additional benefits. "As a journalist from Serbia, I can contact any journalist from the network—whether in Bulgaria, Moscow, Slovenia, doesn't matter where," Vasić says, adding that the exchange of information between the network's members—45 non-profit investigative centers in 34 countries, scores of journalists and several major regional news organizations across Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America—happens on a daily basis. OCCRP also provides English translations for those of KRIK's stories that were produced through international cooperation. Vasić maintains that stories in English bother the subjects of KRIK's investigations the most,

because this helps reveal their corrupt dealings to international policy-makers and a public outside Serbia. The British Guardian and Germany's *Süddeutsche Zeitung* are among the media outlets that have republished KRIK investigations.

Their work has brought them many awards, such as the Global Editors Network Data Journalism Award in 2017. Furthermore, they participated in the Panama Papers investigation, which won the Pulitzer Prize that same year. But the awards did not change much in the way KRIK is perceived in Serbia, Vasić says. They did, however, send a message internationally that their journalists do good work, and are worthy of being offered protection if they were attacked at home.

“Vasić maintains that stories in English bother the subjects of KRIK's investigations the most, because this helps reveal their corrupt dealings to international policy-makers and a public outside Serbia.”

Such was the case in 2016, when KRIK started investigating the property of then-Prime Minister Vučić. The most ruthless attacks came from pro-government press, writing that KRIK's



Digging deep into corruption at the highest level: KRIK's newsroom staff

investigation into Vučić's property was the work of a "mafia", that they were "creating chaos in Serbia" and accusing Dojčinović of being a "sado-masochistic French spy" and a "terrorist", among other things. They also published photos from his private life and of him in the street. Minister without portfolio in the Serbian government Nenad Popović filed four lawsuits against KRIK for publishing information on him based on documents leaked within the "Paradise Papers" investigation. The cases are still ongoing.

In 2015 KRIK also revealed that the current Serbian Finance Minister Siniša Mali bought 24 luxury apartments in Bulgaria—one in his own name and the rest for an unknown buyer—while he was working as advisor to then Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić in 2012 and 2013. As the stories came out, international donors were assured that the new Serbian outlet was a serious investigative newsroom, and grants started coming from organizations such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the EU and the Open Society Foundations.

Branching out

KRIK grew from its initial six members of staff to 14 full-time employees, branching into daily journalism with coverage of major crime and corruption trials, as well as setting up the fact-checking website RasKRIKavanje, whose name is a play on the Serbian word for "unmasking". Apart from journalists and editors, staff at KRIK also include project and office managers.

Since its inception, KRIK has attempted to crowdfund its work. A call for donations accompanies their every major story, which is also strongly promoted on social media.

On several occasions KRIK journalists reached out to readers by distributing pamphlets, and even organized a promotional event at the 2018 Belgrade Book Fair, giving illustrated T-shirts to citizens who donated money. However, only 10-15 percent of KRIK's annual budget comes from a combination of crowdfunding and commercial activities—such as holding seminars and workshops in investigative reporting and journalists' safety. These are activities that KRIK undertook practically from the beginning, drawing on their journalists' rich experience.

“A call for donations accompanies their every major story, which is also strongly promoted on social media.”

Jelena Vasić explains that KRIK is looking to emulate similar outfits from Hungary—Atlatzo.hu and Direkt36—and the Bulgarian investigative website Bivol, which she says are crowdfunding more than 50 percent of their annual budgets. She adds that it would also be good if Serbia copied one solution in particular from neighboring Hungary: According to Hungarian law, citizens can allocate one percent of their personal income tax to a non-profit organization of their choice. "Our colleagues (investigative reporters) from Hungary managed to convince citizens to give them that one percent of their taxes, saying that

in return they would investigate how the remaining 99 percent are spent,” she says.

There is a Serbian system for funding media content in the public interest but this, according to local journalists’ associations and media watchdogs, is routinely abused to fund media that are linked to, or biased in favor of, the ruling political parties.

“We get a lot of messages from people who left Serbia saying that the issues we write about are what drove them to leave.

Between 2015 and January 2019, Serbian institutions, state and local governments allocated over five billion Serbian dinar (around 43 million Euros) from the state and local governments’ budgets to a project funding scheme, according to the Journalists’ Association of Serbia. Under the terms of this program, the state does not fund media directly but instead organizes public calls in which outlets compete by entering projects for reporting in the public interest. Media with ties to individuals from the ruling Progressive Party are routinely awarded the most money in these public calls for the funding of media content. The pro-government TV Pink received millions of Euros in credits from the state, at a time when the company had a large tax debt.

The European Commission’s country report on Serbia published in April 2018 also noted problems with the scheme, saying that there needed to be a “greater transparency of ownership and funding of media outlets.” Editor-in-chief of Serbia’s media watchdog website Cenzolovka, Perica Gunjić, warns that most Serbian investigative newsrooms would “disappear” the minute they stopped receiving international donations. In order to reach sustainability, professional journalism in Serbia would have to receive support from citizens who would pay for subscriptions. “Here [in Serbia], this does not happen because of a widely propagated opinion that information is free,” he states.

The budget share from citizens’ donations could increase if KRIK was able to afford to hire a person to take charge of crowdfunding efforts and audience engagement, according to Vasić. Currently this is done by one of the journalists who has to balance that work with her reporting job. Additional staff could also help to follow up on suggestions from readers on what to investigate next—a development that has been increasing since KRIK has been reaching a wider audience, leading to currently 500 000 unique visitors and a million page views per month.

Moreover, they hope to expand their content for social networks to attract a younger audience. KRIK’s current audience are statistically mostly educated, mostly male, between 30 and 50 years of age. The people who donate or engage on social



networks are mostly very disappointed in Serbia. We get a lot of messages from people who left Serbia saying that the issues we write about are what drove them to leave, Vasić says.

Persistence in the face of danger

It is dangerous to work as an investigative journalist in Serbia. In the dead of night on December 12, 2018, unknown perpetrators threw a Molotov cocktail through the window of Serbian journalist Milan Jovanović’s garage in the Belgrade suburb where he lived. As fire spread from the garage to the rest of the house, the unknowns shot at the front entrance to prevent the elderly Jovanović and his wife from escaping—but they managed to climb through the back window and so save themselves. By morning, the house had been burned to the ground. The attack on Jovanović, who for years reported on alleged corruption of local officials, was the most serious Serbia has seen in years. It was condemned by journalists’ associations, Reporters Without Borders and the OSCE.

In 2018, there were 97 attacks on journalists and the number of incidents has been on the rise in the past five years, according to the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia’s (IJAS) database, which lists physical attacks on journalists and their property, verbal threats and other forms of pressure. IJAS’s General Secretary Svetozar Raković blames the Serbian authorities for creating an atmosphere where journalists fear for their safety. “We believe that the most responsible for this atmosphere are the highest [state] authorities, especially since we see some of the pressures coming from prominent officials,” he says.

The European Commission's 2018 report on Serbia notes that "cases of threats, intimidation and violence against journalists are still a concern, while investigations and final convictions remain rare." International organization Reporters Without Borders ranked Serbia 76th out of 180 countries in its 2018 World Press Freedom Index. This was a drop by ten places compared to 2017. The organization notes that "under President Aleksandar Vučić, Serbia has become a country where it is unsafe to be a journalist."

“When we realized we were being followed, we changed the offices, security procedures, the way we communicate.

Journalists of KRIK and other independent outlets have reported being followed and filmed in the street. Jelena Vasić says that over the years, KRIK's offices were bugged, its journalists and editors followed and photographed. She says that the information about them published in tabloids could only have come from someone in the security services. "When we realized we were being followed, we changed the offices, security procedures, the way we communicate," Vasić admits. While refusing to go into detail for security reasons, she says that a number of KRIK team members underwent training in safety procedures, including how to meet with sources. She readily agrees, however, that it is safer to be a journalist for KRIK than for a local outlet, such as the one the attacked journalist Jovanović works for.

Despite all the challenges and dangers, KRIK journalists refuse to bow to pressure and are not thinking about quitting. They are motivated by the benefit that investigative journalism can bring to society. "I don't think I could contribute to society in some other way more than by investigating the root problem of society—corruption," Vasić concludes.

Author

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Latin America



MEXICO
GUATEMALA
HONDURAS

Guatemala

Guatemala has a population of around 17 million people, making it the most populous country in Central America. Between 1960 and 1996, more than 200 000 Guatemalans were killed or disappeared and an estimated one million people were displaced during a civil war which included a coordinated campaign of violence by the government against its people. After years of military rule, Guatemala today is a presidential democracy. Spanish is the main spoken language with another seven indigenous languages officially recognized. The literacy rate stands at 81 percent. Just over 34 percent of the population have regular access to the internet. Guatemala is ranked 116 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index — no change from the previous year. Attacks on journalists are frequent, leading to a climate of fear and self-censorship.



VENEZUELA
GUYANA
SURINAME
FRENCH GUYANA

BRAZIL

BOLIVIA

Brazil

Brazil is the largest country in Latin America with a population of over 205 million people. Following 21 years of military dictatorship, the country has had a democratic constitution since 1988. The media predominantly publish in Portuguese, Brazil's official language, with TV being the most popular source of information. Over 92 percent of adults aged 15 and above are literate, just over half of the population regularly accesses the Internet. Brazilians are among the most avid users of social media in the world. Brazil is ranked 105 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling 3 places from the previous year. Much of the media is in the hands of a few business families and linked to political actors. Especially investigative journalists have been subjected to verbal and physical attacks as well as judicial proceedings.

Agência Pública | Brazil

The democratization of information

Running a viable news agency and distributing reports free of charge—for Brazil's Agência Pública, this is not a contradiction in terms but a way of achieving their goal: to spread investigative journalism throughout Latin America and sharpen the focus on human rights.

During the 2018 Brazilian presidential election campaign, a single Agência Pública news agency article was republished by 78 media outlets, according to figures given by the team. The investigative piece revealed that most of the attacks, seen as a 'wave' of electoral violence, were committed by supporters of the far-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro—who ended up winning the election. According to the report, in a ten-day period leading up to the election's first round, bolsonaristas were behind 50 of the attacks, in contrast to six supporters of the left-leaning Workers' Party. Websites with extensive audiences in Brazil such as Exame, a magazine specializing in economics, business, politics, and technology, and international media such as the Spanish daily newspaper El País were amongst those that took up the story, adding thousands of social media shares to the publication. On Agência Pública's own website, more than 260,000 users had already shared it. Other international media outlets such as The Guardian and The New York Times used the article as a source.

This may seem like an ordinary journalistic scenario, but it is not. The singularity about it is that none of the newsrooms had to pay Agência Pública—mostly known as Pública—to republish their story.

A human rights news agency

According to Natalia Viana, one of the agency's co-founders, spreading investigative journalism as much as possible—and focusing on human rights—are the goals that have guided Pública since its foundation in 2011. Inspired by examples such as US nonprofit organization ProPublica, the Brazilian nonprofit newsroom, which is based in a small but charming house in a calm street in the old center of São Paulo, doesn't charge for the use of its material. In contrast to most news agencies, everything the team produces is made available under a creative commons license, which means that anyone can republish it without previous authorization, as long as one follows the rules, such as giving the appropriate credit. Likewise, readers do not have to pay or subscribe to have access to their website; it has no paywall. Advertising, used by most of the traditional media, is also not a source of income for Pública. The fact that all their material is entirely open reflects another aim of the organization: the democratization of information.



Having their material published by as many news organizations as possible is, in Viana's opinion, the most efficient way for their work to achieve a significant impact on society. "If you focus on investigative journalism, you are not able to produce that much material, and therefore, you are not viable as a website. To attract an audience, a website has to publish at least five new contents each day. Pública publishes only one," Viana says. On average, each of Pública's stories is replicated by 12 other media organizations. In 2018, their 208 investigative stories were published 2,500 times by more than 700 different media outlets, according to the agency's annual report.

“ Instead of having a sales or advertising department, Pública has developed strong media relations work.

Instead of having a sales or advertising department, Pública has developed strong media relations work. Marina Dias, who is responsible for this area, says that sometimes, depending on the story, they even offer it exclusively to Brazilian newspapers with high circulation. In this case, the contacted newspaper



publishes the content even before Pùblica themselves, something unimaginable for any newsroom or agency operating according to a traditional business model.

Viana explains that being published by such a diverse range of news outlets allows Pùblica not to be identified with specific topics. For instance, if they publish a couple of stories about gender equality today and none in the next three months, Pùblica are not at risk of losing their audience, because they don't have one unique audience, they have many. However, if it isn't the readers, nor the advertisers, nor the newsrooms carrying their stories—who is paying the bills?

Financial survival and organic growth

Most of Pùblica's money comes from international donors, such as the Ford Foundation, the OAK Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, or from NGOs with whom they have es-

tablished paid partnerships. The beginning of the organization in 2011 was connected to "Cablegate", an international collaborative investigation into a diplomatic cable leak, which was, according to Pùblica, their first partnership with Wikileaks. This helped Pùblica to attract attention from the start.

Nevertheless, during most of its first year of existence, Pùblica was maintained by its co-founders, Viana herself and Marina Amaral. The two had worked together at the monthly politics and culture magazine *Caros Amigos*. "For eight months, we were two people working for free; afterwards, we counted on volunteers, and now almost all of us are registered staff," Viana says. Only after this period did they succeed in receiving their first funding from the Ford Foundation.

“To achieve reader funding through means other than crowdsourcing, Pùblica plans to hire someone for a role entirely dedicated to improving their relationships with individual readers.”

Andrea Dip, one of the first reporters to join the team, admits that the ideal, according to the funders themselves, is not to depend on them permanently, in order for Pùblica to build a structure that supports an independent way of funding. She believes that "being funded by readers is the biggest dream of everyone that is doing independent journalism." However, Viana does not believe that a paywall would be a solution for Pùblica, considering that they only publish about 20 stories per month.



Moreover, many of the stories are read on other platforms. Dip prefers to think that “people are going to finance journalism, not for exclusive content, but because they believe that this project is essential for democracy.” To this day, Pública ask for readers’ support through crowdsourcing campaigns. Since setting up, they have run three successful campaigns, all of which exceeded the expected amount and, as of today, figure among the biggest journalistic fundraising successes of this kind in Brazil. The last one, run in 2017, achieved about US\$25 000, with most of the donations from private individuals.

“To be viable as an organization, Viana believes that it is essential to ‘show society that your existence is necessary.’”

Nevertheless, with this money, Pública would never be able to finance all of their activities. In 2017, for instance, crowdsourcing accounted for only 3 percent of Pública’s total revenues, which were about US\$836 000. Most of it, 67 percent, was institutional funding, 21 percent was for specific projects, and 9 percent was sponsorship for events and journalistic mini-grants. “Investigative journalism is valued by readers. The problem is that it requires too much time. Having an employee dedicating months to a story costs a lot,” says Viana. Pública’s most significant expense—about two thirds of the total budget—is the payroll, whereas administrative costs make up 21 percent, followed by travel and general costs.

Another point added by Marina Dias is that crowdfunding campaigns for specific, one-time projects are not the best

way to increase financial support from readers, as they consume a huge amount of time and effort. “We have to find a way to get it without stopping our permanent work; it has to be more organic,” she says. To achieve reader funding through means other than crowdsourcing, Pública plans to hire someone for a role entirely dedicated to improving their relationships with individual readers. With this change, Dias highlights that the challenge won’t be to get support anymore, but to retain it.

The importance of filling a media gap

To be viable as an organization, Viana believes that it is essential to “show society that your existence is necessary.” In the case of Pública, she maintains that before it existed, Brazilian society lacked qualified information on human rights. In the past decade, according to her, investigative journalism in Brazil focused mostly on corruption. The nonprofit newsroom, therefore, was not meant to compete with others; instead, it was meant to fill a gap. “Our motivation has always been to investigate what the traditional media is not covering. Investigations that are difficult, because the reporter has to travel to distant places or which require access to many documents,” Viana says. “What we do is to try to identify who are the ones behind human rights violations,” she states. “And most of the time, these investigations involve big business groups or even branches of the state such as the executive, legislative or the judiciary.” Their dependence on advertising—whether from private companies or from state institutions—means that many traditional media groups do not dare to investigate them and therefore end up in conflict with them.



Defending the democratization of information:
co-founder Natalia Viana

Moreover, time and innovation seem to be two of the most significant components of Pùblica's formula. Reporter Andrea Dip says that in general, reporters have up to three months to work on a single story. There were times when she held more than 30 interviews for one investigation. In order to foster innovation and find new ways to tell stories, or create interactive content with the use of different technologies, Pùblica started journalistic innovation laboratories—known as LABs.

“Investigative journalism requires time to mature, Pùblica provides that time.

The first of seven LABs was the project “100”: In 2016, some weeks before the start of the Olympic Games that took place in Rio de Janeiro, Pùblica set up an online page filled with a hundred small houses as a vehicle to present the stories of 100 families that were reallocated by the government due to city modernization projects. “At the moment you access the project, you hear the noise, and you see the image of a demolition,” describes Mariana Simões, one of the journalists of the team.

By clicking on each one of the colorful buildings, the user can find out—by means of videos, animations, pictures and maps—what happened to each of these families: where they used to live, how they were removed and where their new homes were—in some cases 40 kilometers away from their original ones. There was even a playlist with the songs that reminded the families of their old houses. Simões explains that

they knocked on door after door, following tips and referrals, to find many of these families. “As there was little information on these reallocations, nor had the city hall publicized any data collection to the citizens, our idea was to provide a primary source of information for other journalists.” According to her, not only reporters, but also researchers and social movements, including the removed families, have used these materials.

“In order to foster innovation and find new ways to tell stories, or create interactive content with the use of different technologies, Pùblica started journalistic innovation laboratories, known as LABs.

Compared to other newsrooms where Dip has worked, she considers that Pùblica offers the necessary infrastructure for in-depth journalism, as reporters can go to the field and travel for their investigation. “Investigative journalism requires time to mature, Pùblica provides that time,” Dip says. But while Pùblica has a team which is proud of its work, there are also difficult aspects. Even after almost six years, Dip, for example, cannot forget the story of more than a hundred Brazilians imprisoned for various reasons, such as drug trafficking, in Palmasola in Bolivia. Many of them have been waiting for their trial for months or even years. “It was terrible to enter that prison, see the Brazilians there and know that they will possibly never leave that place. It was one of the most difficult stories I've ever made, it hurt.” Pùblica tries to handle the possible impact of investigations on journalists by encouraging dialogue between reporters and editors and by having monthly meetings, during which reporters can talk about what they are going through in their investigations.

Beyond that, Natalia Viana highlights that, similar to what is happening in the United States, harassment and attacks on journalists are becoming normalized in Brazil. Recently, newly elected President Bolsonaro himself encouraged it by dismissing



critical investigative reports as fake news. “All journalists will have to deal with that, mostly the ones who work with politics, investigative journalism or fact-checking,” she states. From a total of 85 digital attacks against journalists registered by the Brazilian Investigative Journalism Association (Abraji) in 2018, 16 of the targeted professionals worked for Pública.

Pública as an influencer

Since 2011, Pública has not only had its stories republished but, according to Natalia Viana, it has also influenced the Brazilian independent media landscape, which as a result of its work has become much more diverse. Brazilian traditional media, on the other hand, is mostly concentrated in the hands of a few families. Many people, including Viana herself, witnessed that Pública was an inspiration to other journalists who launched their own media organizations—some of them equally non-profit, others pursuing a financial return. By providing institutional support and mentoring, Pública has even incubated some of them, such as the non-profit Ponte Jornalismo, which started in 2014 and focusses on public security. Another example is the startup Gênero e Número, launched in 2016, whose expertise is data journalism concerning gender topics. Trying to better understand this movement, on their fifth anniversary in 2016, Pública mapped 70 Brazilian organizations that were doing independent journalism and put them on an interactive map, to identify how they work and if they are sustainable.

“Pública was an inspiration to other journalists who launched their own media organizations, making Brazil’s media landscape more diverse.”

In March of the same year, as a second—and even more significant—step, they launched Casa Pública (in English “Public House”), with the goal of creating a cultural center for journalism. Located in the traditional district of Botafogo in Rio de Janeiro—a 15-minute walk from the beach—the place has already received 5000 people for more than a hundred hosted events, according to Pública. Mariana Simões, who is also the coordinator of Casa Pública, says that they want to not only promote independent journalism, but also provide a place to discuss and think over today’s journalism. Besides that, it also offers a residency program for international journalists. In total, since 2016, the traditional, well-preserved and spacious house, with its imposing crystal chandelier, wooden floors and stairs, big windows, and walls half panelled with wood, half tiled with typical Portuguese white and blue tilework, has served as an inspiration and a temporary home and office for 40 international journalists. According to Simões, “the residencies are important not only for promoting coverage focused on human rights, but for spreading Brazilian issues to the international agenda.”

In 2016, when Brazil hosted the Olympic Games, they received 150 applications. Among the chosen residents was a journalist from Kenya covering sports for the first time from a human rights angle, two Italian journalists, also reporting on the mega-event, and a journalist from the British Guardian who wrote about the Brazilian prison system.

“The residencies are important not only for promoting coverage focused on human rights, but for spreading Brazilian issues to the international agenda.”

Viana believes that under Bolsonaro’s government, “Brazil is going to be once again the focus of international media coverage, similarly to what happened during the World Cup and the Olympic Games,” increasing the importance of an initiative like Casa Pública that provides not only residencies for international journalists but also a place for exchange with local journalists, who can give a local perspective. Some weeks before Bolsonaro took office, Pública announced that from January on they would focus their coverage on the new government and, for the first time, have a correspondent established in the country’s capital, Brasília. “At this moment, our motivation is doubled, Bolsonaro has a trajectory of verbal attacks on human rights, and now he will also take concrete actions,” Viana says. “To investigate how these actions are going to impact peoples’ lives, journalism is going to be even more necessary.”

Author

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Plaza Pública | Guatemala

A breath of fresh air for the readers

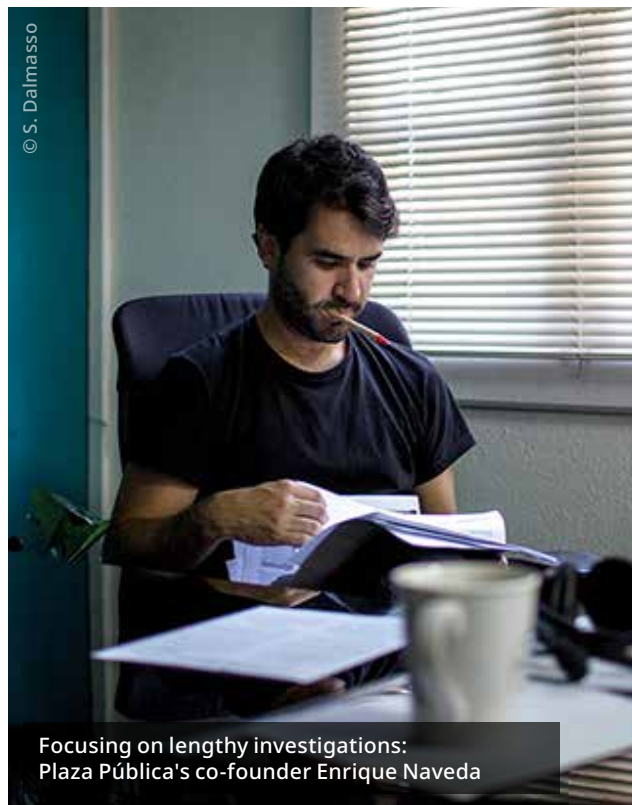
The patronage of a Catholic University might be an unusual basis for a business model. But in the case of this Guatemalan news site, it provides its journalists with benefits many of their colleagues can only dream of: the ability to carry out hard-hitting investigative journalism without having to worry about covering their basic income.

A deep blue banner hangs from the outside of a compact white-washed building located on a verdant hill on the grounds of the private Rafael Landívar University in Guatemala City, the country's capital. The banner reads: "Plaza Pública: Periodismo de Profundidad," proclaiming one is approaching the home of "in-depth journalism." Inside, a group of journalists—mostly in their 20's and 30's, energized and motivated—sits around Plaza Pública's conference table. Today there is much on the editorial agenda: editorial re-structuring and planning for coverage of Guatemala's upcoming elections.

This pioneering online news project began in 2010 with a mission to become a place for journalism that would be unlike any then produced in this Central American country. A site that would be, in the words of one of its founders, Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, "a breath of fresh air for the readers in Guatemala and beyond—because at the time (the traditional media) tended to be very superficial, conservative and dependent on businesses and... politicians." Rodríguez Pellecer resigned several years ago from his position at Plaza Pública to launch his own online digital media site Nómada. He recalls that Plaza Pública was created when the Universidad Rafael Landívar contacted him in August 2010 with a proposal to create an investigative journalism platform. "It's every journalist's dream," says Rodríguez, "to run a newspaper that digs deep, that doesn't depend on advertising, and doesn't have to cozy up to politicians."

“It was a new approach to journalism for Guatemala—relying much more on investigative reporting, and examining the social and economic mores that govern this deeply unequal country.

Nearly a decade later, "the dream" is going strong, headed up for the last five years by another of the project's five original founders, former print reporter Enrique Naveda. Naveda recalls that during the early years of the project, "we were just one small office upstairs. We first met there for a month and a half before we launched the newspaper—we didn't have any sections or equipment or anything."



Focusing on lengthy investigations:
Plaza Pública's co-founder Enrique Naveda

It was a new approach to journalism for Guatemala—relying much more on investigative reporting, and examining the social and economic mores that govern this deeply unequal country. For instance, Plaza Pública sought to interpret the country's ruling power structure in a different way: "In other countries," says Naveda, "it's about government power. In Guatemala, power has always been outside the government, in the private sector." This persuasive power of the Guatemalan private sector is a reality that continues to heavily impact most of the country's media—economically and editorially. Explains Naveda: "Media (in Guatemala) has been largely dependent on kinship relations or simply ideological relations of affinity. We wanted to break with that."

From the start, investigative reporting was also considered a significant way to motivate discussion within Guatemala's "public square"—the literal meaning of this digital project's name. "There was nothing like it when it first appeared," says Naveda. "A medium that was not focused on fast-turnaround news, but on lengthy investigations, analysis, features, profiles, crónicas. Plaza Pública is a digital site with the aura of a magazine—featuring in-depth reporting, analysis, and data visualization," he adds. "Since then other colleagues have created



A platform for debate:
Plaza Pública

projects along a similar line—other digital sites, citizen journalism, community journalism, etc. But at that moment, there was no one else attempting to produce this kind of journalism that digs deep (into issues)—*periodismo de profundidad*.” Plaza Pública’s name owes a lot to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the “public sphere”—an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and thus influence political action.

In the early years, the project did little publicity. “We’ve always relied on the quality of our investigations and did no advertising in those early years. Our growth was slow and by word of mouth,” says Naveda. By 2018, the digital site was registering over 3 million views a year, a nearly 20 percent increase over 2017. According to their data, Plaza Pública has 1.3 million regular visitors. In 2019, Guatemala’s media is increasingly feeling economic and political pressures, and freedom of expression appears to be once again at risk. This makes the Plaza Pública model for sustainability—i.e. an investigative journalism undertaking not dependent on commercial advertising—an attractive one to many journalists and bears further examination in light of the concepts of censorship and media viability.

The freedom of being independent from commercial interests

While Plaza Pública is its own news world located within the confines of an academic institution, this investigative journalism project also exists as an integral part of the University Rafael Landívar, a University run by the Jesuit Order, which has a long and rigorous educational tradition. César León, coordinator for institutional relations at Plaza Pública, explains that “Plaza Pública is directly dependent on the Rafael Landívar University. Its organizational structure is as an entity entirely within the Vice-Chancery for Investigation and Projection.” Plaza Pública has therefore dedicated a position to the coordination of all details having to do with being part of the University’s Vice-Chancery, and León holds this important post. The department was only a few years old when its leaders came up with the idea of housing a media project within its walls, in order to further its research mission, which coincided with the agenda of the founding journalists: “Our investigative agenda falls within the framework established by the University, which is governed by the Church’s social doctrine ‘to strive for a more inclusive society’, a utopia,” confirms general coordinator Naveda.



Currently the University covers 70 percent of the project's costs. The rest comes through fundraising from foundations such as the Open Society Foundations, the Ford Foundation, and the International Center for Journalists, and other donations. The University contribution, says León, includes an annual budget for operational expenses for travel, transfers, supplies, etc. In addition to that budget, the University covers salaries for the 20-person staff, which includes reporters, editors, photojournalists, data journalists, multi-media practitioners, and administrative positions as well as facilities and services (electricity, internet, cleaning, etc.). "Usually," he says, "these funds already have an assigned destination, but that destination can be changed in exceptional cases. If we need new or additional equipment, such as computers, there is also an option to apply [for additional funding] to the University." The University can decide to change the budget allocated to Plaza, "to reduce it or expand it," says León, "as is the case with any of its dependencies." Outside funding allows Plaza Pública to hire additional journalistic staff.

“Our investigative agenda falls within the framework established by the University, which is governed by the Church’s social doctrine ‘to strive for a more inclusive society’, a utopia.

For the journalists of Plaza Pública, the advantages of their connection to the Rafael Landívar University far outweigh any disadvantages. The same is true for the freelancers who work with the project, like independent journalist Julie López, one of the venture’s founding members, who now reports occasionally for the project. She recalls the years she was on staff, and the freedom of “not having to rely on commercial publicity and

therefore having been able to publish basically anything.” She also appreciated the liberty provided by the university support of not having to worry about paying rent for offices. “Basically, whatever income there was, was designated for salaries and for resources for reporters,” she recalls. This allows Plaza Pública’s journalists to receive pay that is “within the average of mid-to-high salaries earned by Guatemalan journalists,” according to Plaza Pública’s León, as well as to attend training seminars—capacity-building has been a priority for the project from the start.

“For the journalists of Plaza Pública, the advantages of their connection to the Rafael Landívar University far outweigh any disadvantages.

León asserts that despite the economic dependence on the University that arises from their business model, this collaboration “allows Plaza Pública to not have to depend on market tendencies or preferences. It gives us stability as well as independence.” Moreover, both he and general coordinator Naveda say the editorial side has complete independence: “to such a degree that Plaza Pública has the freedom to follow investigative ideas that we ourselves propose. This gives us liberty and a foundation from which to collaborate with other organizations, as well as to strengthen capacity and to address issues of concern.”

This business model also permits Plaza Pública the liberty to produce investigative journalism that sometimes touches on delicate issues. Such was the case of an award-winning investigation of child labor in sugar plantations owned by the director of a powerful private sector group, the Guatemalan Chamber of Agriculture. “This investigation was really a watershed moment for Guatemalan journalism,” remarks Naveda as he explains

that, as one of the world’s principal sugar producers, Guatemala’s sugar industry wields great political influence. “Never before had a media vehicle reported on abuses or exploitation in that industry,” he states. Naveda proudly recalls that the article had an impact on international labor organizations: “It was read in Geneva and New York,” he says, adding that it eventually led to the adoption of a manual of best practices by the Guatemalan Chamber of Agriculture which outlawed child labor in the country’s sugar fields.

This is just one example of the kind of hard-hitting investigative journalism Plaza Pública is able to produce without the constraints of self-censorship that are often part of the Guatemalan media scene. This has been especially true in the last few years, as the private sector has placed increased pressure on Guatemala’s media, withdrawing advertising revenue from newspapers and broadcast stations which have reported on the endemic corruption involving the government and the private sector; pressure which has led to widespread layoffs and reductions in the news budgets of a wide number of traditional Guatemalan media organizations—taking a toll on the output of investigative reporting. In the meantime, Plaza Pública prepares to continue its hard-hitting investigations related to, among other topics, the critical upcoming elections.

Limits to investigations?

In examining Plaza Pública’s business model, the question arises: To what extent is the connection to a Catholic university a hindrance to reporting on what could be controversial issues in this Catholic-run educational institution? When the project started, the topic of abortion was one of those delicate issues, Julie López recalls. “Plaza (Pública) had basically free rein to publish anything with the exception of promoting abortion. I mean, if there was anything factual that had to be mentioned about the topic, of course it could be published... but it was a sensitive spot.” In Guatemala, abortion is illegal except in cases where the mother’s life is in the balance.

Father Francisco Iznardo, who heads Plaza Pública’s advisory board, remembers that before he joined the group, which meets every two weeks to discuss editorial content, there had been an issue regarding that particular topic, but that it had been resolved: “There is nothing like prior censorship (at Plaza Pública),” says the Jesuit priest. “On the contrary, this is a grand space for debate and for in-depth investigative articles, as well as for editorial columns in which authors have absolute liberty.”

Sometimes the project’s connection to the University, for Plaza Pública’s general coordinator Enrique Naveda, is a hindrance in that the project itself cannot raise funds except from philanthropic institutions. “We cannot sell services,” he says. But, then again, he doubts selling services would add much to help



Plaza Pública’s growth, especially since, as a part of the University, the only commercial services they could sell would have to be educational—putting them in competition with the institution that houses and supports them.

“This is a grand space for debate and for in-depth investigative articles, as well as for editorial columns in which authors have absolute liberty.”

And while this may be a limitation, it is one Naveda accepts: “The great majority of the time we feel we have absolute (editorial) independence...we contribute to the investigative and research mission that governs this University, and we do that because we’re in agreement with that mission.”

Plaza Pública’s first director Martín Rodríguez Pellecer, however, felt there could be limits to the project’s mutual research mission with the University. This played into the reasons he left Plaza Pública in 2013, following blow-back he says he received from “some at the University” in the wake of an attempt to publish a follow-up to an investigation of ties connecting some Guatemalan elites with the military. The first article, entitled, “The Military and the Elite: The Alliance that won the War,”



Enjoying the independence from commercial interests: Plaza Pública's staff

detailed the close alliance between Guatemala's wealthy business class and the military that waged a bloody war from 1960 to 1996 in which more than 200 000 Guatemalans were killed. In this conflict, which the UN termed "genocide" against indigenous Maya, Rodríguez revealed that influential businessmen lent the military the use of their private planes for transport and even to bomb the territories of the Ixil Maya people. These same businessmen were at the time of the article's publishing—during the genocide trial of former dictator General Efraín Ríos—concerned they too would be taken to court for their involvement. During internal debates as to whether or not to publish an op-ed related to the topic, Rodríguez decided to resign and started his own online website. Still, Rodríguez recognized Plaza Pública as a unique opportunity to produce hard-hitting independent investigations: "It is important to underline that the Rafael Landívar University has never in (my) three years interfered with the project's content nor have they vetoed us from publishing any journalistic article," he wrote in his resignation letter published on the Plaza Pública site.

Security issues and 'the new political climate' in Guatemala

Independent journalist López recalls that when she joined the project eight years ago, journalism in Guatemala was ironically in a better situation as far as security was concerned: "It was the third year of Álvaro Colom's government... and there were not really that many dangers for journalists (working in the capital). Of course, there were dangerous situations for media

everywhere, especially in the provinces, but the pressure on the media wasn't anywhere close to what it is today." In 2019, Guatemala is undergoing what some call a constitutional crisis and some analysts a "slow motion coup". The President and his congressional allies, often called "the Alliance of the Corrupt," have expelled a U.N.-backed anti-corruption commission which worked with the country's justice department to root out corrupt politicians and mafias from government. The Morales government has also taken on the courts and the media. Plaza Pública's Enrique Naveda and the other staff anticipate a tough year ahead. "We expect a year of political, social and economic setbacks," says Naveda. But then again, the project has always faced challenges.

“In ensuing years, as Plaza Pública became more well-known and gained a larger following, it sometimes became caught up in the political fray.

Naveda recalls that Plaza Pública was launched just as the presidential campaign which would elect former army general Otto Pérez Molina got underway: Pérez Molina is now in prison on corruption charges. "The political climate was the classic one for elections in Guatemala—a lot of tension and disinformation," Naveda recalls. "At that time, it was said there was a lot of political violence, but we were able to report that those elections actually had less political violence (than previous campaigns)."



In ensuing years, as Plaza Pública became more well-known and gained a larger following, it sometimes became caught up in the political fray.

“These young people have fire in their bellies,” says Sánchez, “with much love for their country and with a lot of courage — their type of journalism has shown us the way.”

One example occurred during the 2011 presidential campaign, when a candidate sent out a series of documents ostensibly from Plaza Pública to a number of diplomatic missions in Guatemala City, documents which disparaged another candidate. In addition to such incrimination attempts, Plaza Pública’s reporters and editors have also experienced physical threats. Naveda recalls working with a female colleague on the last election of Guatemala’s human rights ombudsman: “She received direct death threats and in the end the investigation was published without her byline.” The case was handled internally by Plaza Pública, with a complaint made to the Public Ministry. “But nothing much came of it,” says Naveda.

In recent years, the threats have increased — one just in 2018 from one of the country’s most powerful politicians, now deceased. “We’ve been followed by individuals in pick-up trucks while conducting investigations in the provinces having to do

with land disputes — these are the vehicles favored by drug-traffickers,” says Naveda. This is par for the course in countries like Guatemala, where the traditional power structures often see journalists as adversaries, and threats and physical attacks are commonplace. Plaza Pública has offered their staff safety training, and security is tight, with armed guards and cameras at all entrances to the Rafael Landívar University. Adds Naveda: “We’re careful about how we deal with sources. We do little via telephone — and we’re vigilant with our computers and digital devices.”

“I believe the practice of journalism (in Guatemala) has always gone hand in hand with fear, pressures, violence and threats,” says veteran journalist Haroldo Sánchez, founder of the news department at Guatevisión, which was once known as “Guatemala’s independent television station.” The last two years have seen multiple lay-offs at Guatevisión, as ownership has been consolidated with the daily Prensa Libre. Sánchez himself was a target in the last round of dismissals — which led to a widespread questioning of the future of independent media in Guatemala. He believes the lack of a firewall between the editorial and marketing departments in those mainstream journalistic vehicles has led to their decline as independent news sources. “Prensa Libre [the country’s largest daily] is drowning due to economic pressures,” he states, “precisely because their editorial position was to denounce corruption.”

This is where new media such as Plaza Pública and others such as Nómada — founded by Plaza Pública’s first director — have



Following the story:
Plaza Pública's journalist at work

come in to fill the void. "These young people have fire in their bellies," says Sánchez, "with much love for their country and with a lot of courage—their type of journalism has shown us the way."

“ León says that, while the project is already reaching multiple audiences in Guatemala and even globally, he envisions a time when the project will adopt new formats and story-telling styles.

International media watchdog organizations, such as Reporters Without Borders, point to Guatemala as a country still rife with “constant violence and impunity... which makes honest journalism a difficult task.” Reporters Without Borders says on its website, “Guatemala continues to be one of the Western Hemisphere’s most dangerous countries for the media.” The veteran journalist Sánchez observes that when intransigent ruling powers in Guatemala are bothered by what’s reported in the media, “the choice often comes down to ‘let’s fire him or kill him’...And it’s easier to lay someone off than to kill them.” This pessimistic view of the current status of journalism in Guatemala has Sánchez looking favorably at Plaza Pública’s

business model, with its ties to a private university and the freedom this provides journalists to produce hard-hitting investigative reports. He himself is now thinking of creating an independent digital television channel financed by foundations, which won’t be subject to economic pressures—the model for media viability employed by non-profit news sites and by Plaza Pública.

Plaza Pública’s future

As this pioneering investigative reporting project nears a decade of existence, its leaders have much to say about their vision for Plaza Pública for the next ten years: “I see a lot of opportunities in the short and long term,” says institutional relations director César León, “especially in regard to reaching new audiences.” León says that, while the project is already reaching multiple audiences in Guatemala and even globally, he envisions a time when the project will adopt new formats and story-telling styles, “and the capacity to do much more multi-media production and data journalism to explain complicated processes to different audiences.” This may counteract a certain view among some people that Plaza Pública tends to serve an elite audience, excluding some in a multilingual country with a high rate of illiteracy and limited digital access. “In Guatemala there are more than 20 different languages spoken,” says Plaza Pública director Naveda. “This



Encouraging other independent media in Guatemala:
Plaza Pública

poses a challenge as we try to be more efficient in reaching audiences beyond our website—for example through radio and social media.”

But Naveda cautions that the project still needs to be judicious as to where to invest valuable resources even as it attempts to expand its reach. “We are a small medium with a reporting, editorial, and administrative staff that fluctuates between 15 and 20 persons. We put out hundreds of in-depth articles each year, in addition to training programs and public forums... so we have to be really clear regarding where and how we’ll have the most impact—will it be in seeking a broader audience which demands more targeted messages, or in an appeal to a key audience?” And while that question is being sorted out in editorial meetings each week, Naveda and his staff have a dream for the future of the project: “In five or ten years,” he says, “Plaza Pública has to make a great organizational and editorial leap forward... realizing that its mission is to serve [the entirety of] Central America.”

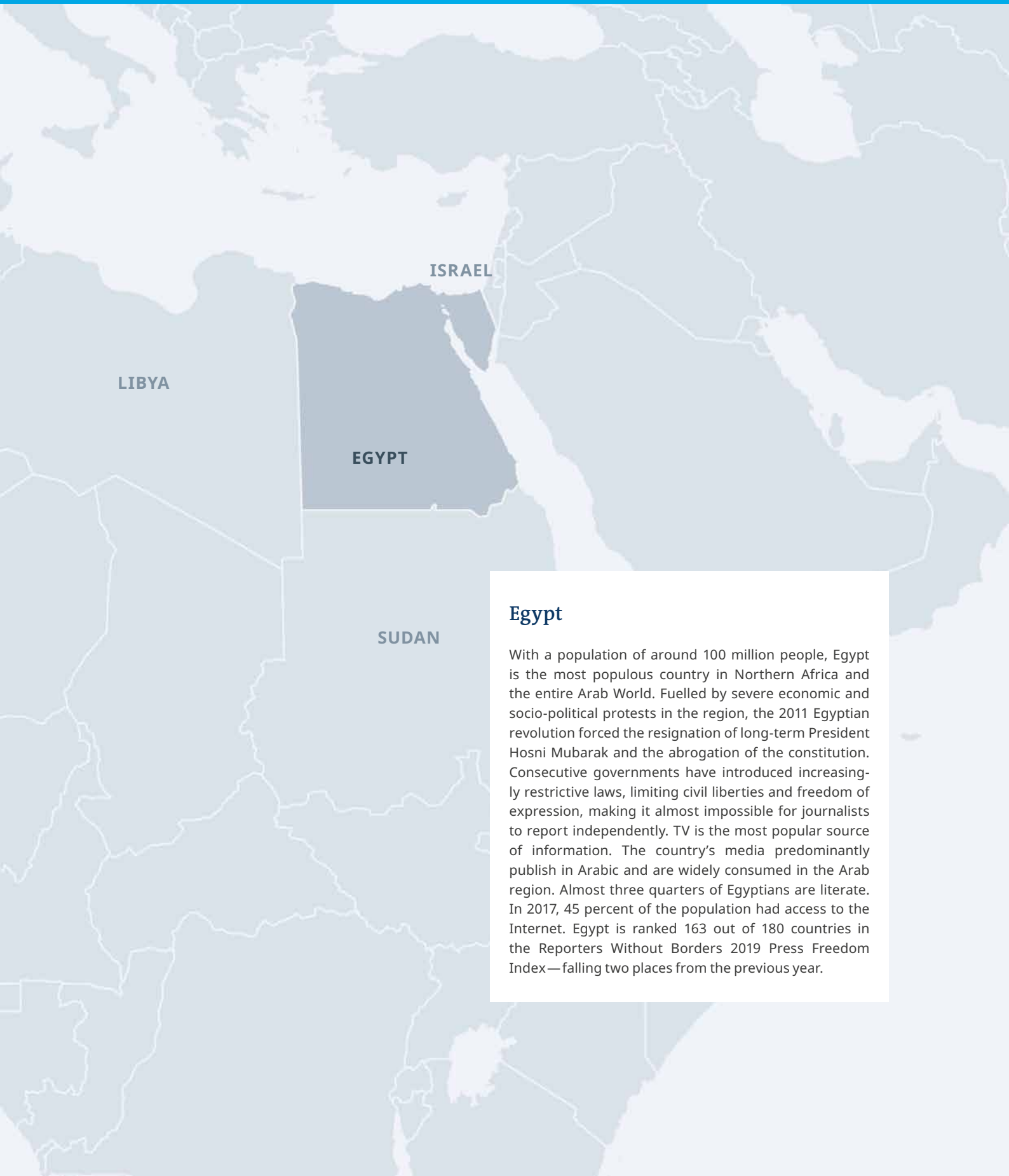
Naveda continues laying out his vision for Plaza Pública to develop into a regional medium with impact: “I hope that Plaza Pública can accomplish what politicians haven’t been able to do: the integration of Central America.” He envisions a “truly regional news project, not just one with sporadic coverage [of other countries], but the first news site that would consistently provide information, analysis, and investigative reporting covering the five countries of Central America.”

Author

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Middle East



Egypt

With a population of around 100 million people, Egypt is the most populous country in Northern Africa and the entire Arab World. Fuelled by severe economic and socio-political protests in the region, the 2011 Egyptian revolution forced the resignation of long-term President Hosni Mubarak and the abrogation of the constitution. Consecutive governments have introduced increasingly restrictive laws, limiting civil liberties and freedom of expression, making it almost impossible for journalists to report independently. TV is the most popular source of information. The country's media predominantly publish in Arabic and are widely consumed in the Arab region. Almost three quarters of Egyptians are literate. In 2017, 45 percent of the population had access to the Internet. Egypt is ranked 163 out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders 2019 Press Freedom Index—falling two places from the previous year.

Mada Masr | Egypt

Why not tell an investigative story in comic style?

Journalists at Egypt's Mada Masr have one goal: to 'comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable' through their reporting. As a result, their website has been blocked by the authorities. How do they manage to continue?

In an old Egyptian building overlooking spacious roads in Cairo, a group of 30 young journalists endure intolerable circumstances in order to keep reporting facts. Their website Mada Masr has been blocked for more than a year without any clear reasons, part of a campaign by the Egyptian authorities against news websites that they claim “support terrorism.” In order to stay alive and accessible for their readers, Mada Masr is using alternative distribution channels. “Nearly everybody in Egypt is on Facebook,” says editor-in-chief Lina Attalah, using links posted on their Facebook page to give their loyal readers continuous access. Alternatively, readers can visit Mada Masr via VPN.

Mada Masr, which is the Arabic word for ‘range’ or ‘scope’, provides a wide range of content—political and economic in-depth analysis and creative writing, as well as investigative journalism. Alongside Mada’s seasonal cooking recipes, readers can find a videostory about a watchmaker in downtown Cairo. Unusually for Egypt, it publishes in English and Arabic to serve Egyptians as well as people living abroad with accurate and comprehensive information. All stories have a strong regional focus. What makes the website different from others is the way it looks: Sharp-tongued comics catch the eye, funny cartoons and illustrations are featured alongside sensitive articles and touching videos, as well as photo-stories. “It’s an attempt to clash with the overall situation represented in the lack of freedom of expression and surrounded with dangers of arrest, travel bans and distortion against journalists when publishing content that criticizes the regime,” says Attalah.

“ Mada Masr’s goal: to provide data-based stories, investigative journalism and develop a sustainable business model.

An experienced and award-winning journalist, Attalah has reported from conflict areas such as Sudan, the Palestinian Territories, Syria and Lebanon. In 2015, the Arabian Business Magazine listed her as one of ‘100 Powerful Women’ in the Arab region. US-based Time Magazine named her a ‘New Generation Leader’ and ‘Muckraker of the Arab World’ in 2017, highlighting the risks she has taken in setting up Mada Masr and continuing to provide a critical voice amid restrictions. In April 2018, Mada Masr received the Free Media Pioneer Award from the International Press Institute, honouring innovations to promote access to information and ensure free, independent media.



Andeel: artist and illustrator at Mada Masr. He contributed the cover of this publication

The fight against restrictions on honest journalism

Mada Masr was founded in 2013, following the shutdown of the editorial operations of the printed English language newspaper “Egypt Independent”; the newspaper had struggled with censorship because of its critical reporting during and after the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Lina Attalah together with 24 colleagues from the newspaper decided to take matters into their own hands as they were adamant they would continue to provide critical content on the political transformation their country was going through. Their goal: to provide data-based stories, investigative journalism and develop a sustainable business model. Publishing in English was a deliberate choice: “We wanted to work as we are used to [at the Egypt Independent] and also reach a bigger audience.” Mada Masr’s goal: to provide databased stories, investigative journalism and develop a sustainable business model.

It is clear when one enters the relatively small Mada Masr newsroom that the editorial team works with a real buzz, trading information and debate—in stark contrast to the limitations



and conventions which so obviously constrain journalists in so many other newsrooms in the country. The newsroom combines calm and bustle: Some are glued to their laptops, intent on research, with a cigarette or a coffee cup within easy reach, while others are shuffling through the newspapers on the oval table. They are looking for new angles on stories from other media outlets that they can pick up and develop, and they move around the office exchanging ideas, joking and eating snacks in a familiar and comfortable atmosphere. Reporters are free to organize their work — some prefer to write their articles on the balcony, overlooking a quiet part of Cairo’s Dokki district, an otherwise very busy commercial area filled with shops, restaurants and street vendors, seeking inspiration in the hustle and bustle outside. Although Attalah is the chief editor, all decisions at Mada Masr are taken collectively. “We negotiate a lot in our team. We also skip topics because not everybody agrees,” she explains. For Attalah, it is this collective that gives Mada Masr the necessary strength to continue reporting under difficult circumstances. None of her reporters have left despite the fact that working conditions have been less than favorable for independent journalists in Egypt.

Egypt’s current constitution enshrines the values and principles of freedom of the press. However, imprisoned journalists and blocked websites remind everyone that these rights are not upheld in practice. In 2018, Egypt was ranked the third worst jailer of journalists worldwide by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), with 25 Egyptian journalists imprisoned — 12 of them without proper trial or sentence for any crime. Despite these harsh circumstances, in 2014 Mada Masr’s team decided to invest more time and resources in

investigative journalism — which meant working on a specific topic for months, moving from daily production to exhaustive research. “This was not a coincidence,” Attalah points out, “but the outcome of the interest of some editors in producing this type of content, especially after the media turning point that accompanied the January 2011 revolution,” which ousted President Hosni Mubarak and was followed by a government of the Muslim brotherhood. Despite these harsh circumstances, in 2014 Mada Masr’s team decided to invest more time and resources in investigative journalism.

“Attalah believes that investigative stories should relate directly to people’s daily routines or social priorities.”

The openness among their sources that journalists witnessed after the revolution was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for investigative journalism, Attalah explains. “In the pre-revolution era, we were unable to access officials in the government or the executive, but the revolution raised in them the sense of resistance and dissatisfaction of the general situation. So without losing their positions, they provided us with information that had been forbidden and unreachable,” she says. During the revolution, bold and award-winning investigations were being published in the Egyptian media, dealing with topics such as toxic dyes and carcinogenic clothes in Egyptian markets, or the escape of Hamas and Hezbollah members from the Al-Marg prison in Northern Egypt.



'Dynamo journalist' Hossam Bahgat

Although investigative stories have been very popular right from the beginning, Mada Masr does not include a specific section for them on their website as the team cannot guarantee having regular content to publish. Neither does the outlet have a dedicated budget for producing investigative stories. "There are endeavors to create constant forms of investigative reporting at Mada Masr, but we are working on reminding people of the pattern of investigative journalism, which is different to features and articles," Attalah points out, stressing the importance of presenting investigative reports in an attractive format to grab the audience's attention. Furthermore, she believes that they should relate directly to people's daily routines or social priorities.

“In addition to written stories, Attalah encourages her team to use non-verbal tools such as visualization and cross-media content in order to facilitate information for readers, especially for economic investigations.

Untold stories that satisfy curiosity

Asked about Mada Masr investigations that particularly attracted public attention, one immediately springs to Attalah's mind: the "Arab Sharkas Cell". Hossam Bahgat, a recognized journalist from Mada Masr's team, worked alone on the discovery.

“Despite these harsh circumstances, in 2014 Mada Masr's team decided to invest more time and resources in investigative journalism.

He followed up on the story of the trial of nine men in August 2014, seven of whom received the death sentence after being accused of killing soldiers during a raid on the village of Arab Sharkas in Northern Egypt. Official media simply repeated the condemnation of the defendants that was promoted by the government; Mada Masr found proof that some of them were innocent and had been tortured while in prison. All of them had been deprived of their legal right to contest the verdict. Overall, Bahgat's investigations provided proof of the use of military trials against civilians. Together with pressure from international human rights groups and a public outcry on social media after six of the accused had been executed, the administrative court appealed the decision to carry out the death sentence on the basis that it violated the constitution, saving the lives of at least one of the accused.

According to Lina Attalah, Mada Masr reached an audience of half a million users per month before the website was blocked. Since its closure, it is impossible to estimate the number of followers as even VPN services are sometimes subject to interference by the regime, which prevents the collation of user numbers. In addition to written stories, Attalah encourages her team to use non-verbal tools such as visualization and cross-media content in order to facilitate information for readers, especially for economic investigations, which can be a little inaccessible for some audiences. In any case, she believes that online media platforms must use visual elements. "It is a tool of innovation as we publish different types of content which is totally different to the content spread usually in Egypt. We are trying to be unique," she explains.

The dangers of being a journalist

Hossam Bahgat is one of Mada Masr's strongest investigative journalists—Attalah calls him a "dynamo journalist". A well-known activist and the founder of the Egyptian Initiative of Personal Rights, the 40-year-old has won several awards, among them the 2011 Alison Des Forges Award from Human Rights Watch for upholding the personal freedoms of all Egyptians. He knows too well that investigative reporting comes with a price in Egypt. In 2015, he was detained for two days after publishing a story about the trial of military personnel accused of a coup attempt. "I was charged with publishing false news that harms national interests and disseminating information that disturbs public peace," Bahgat recalls. His short detention did not dis-



Taking decisions collectively:
the team of Mada Masr

hearten the team at all but encouraged them to carry on. However, it was obviously still a harsh experience for him. “I was bothered because I didn’t know how long I would be imprisoned for or what would happen to me behind bars,” he adds. The upside of this short arrest became evident in the wide support he received from colleagues and the Egyptian Journalists’ Syndicate, which appointed a lawyer to attend the inquiry with him even though he was not a syndicate member. At the time, this seemed to be a positive sign, since normally the Syndicate does not consider non-members or even online journalists as journalists. Bahgat was only released after signing a statement declaring that he would no longer write about the military establishment.

“There is a segment of readers who believe that investigative stories raise confusion in the community. But we see that if the published content is based on persuasive evidence, people will believe us and appreciate our efforts.

Looking back, Bahgat recalls the first investigative story he wrote for Mada Masr in 2014 entitled “Who let the jihadis out?”. He credits this story with changing the accepted narrative perpetuated by the mainstream press and the authorities after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted, which said that they had

released all Islamists from prisons while ruling the country. In his article, Bahgat provided proof that many more pardons of jihadis and Islamists took place during the 2011 rule of the military council than subsequently under the Muslim Brotherhood.

As for the impact of social media as a recognized research tool for new media, his impression is that for the majority of his investigative stories, the first lead came via posts on social media. This was also the case with regard to the above mentioned Arab Sharkas story, where a post on Facebook shared by one of the defendants’ relatives provided the first lead. Responding to a question about his personal bias as an activist playing a role in highlighting specific topics as a journalist, Bahgat says: “I stay away from my preferable topics related to law, human rights and personal freedom.” Due to the situation in Egypt, many topics are out of reach.

To achieve high quality investigative stories that appeal to its audience, Mada Masr conducts regular internal workshops to critically evaluate the team’s writing approach. They consider this type of training the most effective. Moreover, editing and creative writing workshops are on offer.

Fighting back with creative solutions

Back in the newsroom, editor-in-chief Lina Attalah is going through the Mada Masr offices, joining the staff in the



Mada Masr staff working on the balcony of their offices

newsroom. She sees an upside to the current banning of Mada Masr: “Despite this gloomy situation, the team is being more collaborative and stronger to achieve the goals of producing valuable content.” Attalah knows that “there is a segment of readers who believe that investigative stories raise confusion in the community. But we see that if the published content is based on persuasive evidence, people will believe us and appreciate our efforts.”

The most negative impact of the block on the website has been the annulment of all the advertising. “Frankly, it had an obvious damage on our financial situation but has not limited the number of followers who access our content through alternative platforms,” Attalah says. They put in place a plan B to overcome the financial losses by cutting down some budgeted costs without reducing reporters’ wages. The website remained viable during the last five years, according to Attalah, by “providing editorial and translation services, as well as producing projects with respective stakeholders interested in funding content that revolves around specific socio-economic issues”—stakeholders such as NGOs, companies and universities. This gives Mada Masr’s staff the possibility of having their reporting projects funded, and means they can still stumble across an important story.

The chief editor believes that Mada Masr probably had an impact on other media outlets as she has noticed a few new independent media websites. “We all learn from each other and for us we encourage the good game,” she says, using the Egyptian

metaphor that encourages honest competition between counterparts to foster improvement. But times are hard for independent voices in Egypt. According to statistics, more than 500 local and international websites have been blocked since the state of emergency was announced in 2017, allowing authorities to censor all forms of communication on the Internet in order to protect the state from terrorist onslaughts. The Egyptian parliament has also passed a law that defines social media accounts and blogs with more than 5000 followers as media outlets, making them subject to prosecution for publishing false news.

“Times are hard for independent voices in Egypt.”

No official reasons were given regarding the blocking of Mada Masr, as the last judicial ruling in September 2018 referred the case for a technical review to a panel of experts from the Ministry of Justice. The judge stated that none of the political parties that Mada Masr had asked for an official response—including the Egyptian President, the Defense Minister, the Interior Minister and the head of the Supreme Media Regulatory—had any input about their case. They have now submitted an application to legalize their status as a media platform under the law regulating the press and media (law 180/2018) but are still waiting for a reply.

Recent political developments do give hope: In 2017, the head of the Egyptian Supreme Media Regulatory Council announced a draft of a freedom of information law which states that the Egyptian state is committed to providing information in a transparent manner to its citizens, describing it as the property of the people. Attalah believes that once this law has been passed by Parliament, it will give journalists and even the average citizen the eligibility to communicate with executive organizations and help Mada Masr carry out more investigations. Until then, they will continue to seek inspiration on the bustling streets outside their office in Cairo’s Dokki district.

Author

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Synopsis

Sustaining the scoops

This publication has featured a great variety of investigative media, each of them with their unique history, spirit and organizational culture. And yet they have a lot in common: constantly being on their feet, exploring and trying out new ways to ensure their media stays viable; adhering to quality and ethical journalism, thereby building relationships of trust with their audiences; knowing who their audience is and building loyal communities; and integrating new digital technology and processes into their work where possible. This has led to another fundamental viability ingredient: a very strong brand that has made investigative journalism an integral part of their DNA.

The investigative media in this publication

Analyze markets strategically: They look at what their markets can offer, where the limitations are and how to deal with the biggest threats to their business—in terms of finances, legal threats and qualified staff.

Integrate people dedicated to business: Rappler, Atlatzo.hu and Tempo are examples of media that all have staff who spend a large amount of their time—if not all of it—on ensuring their outlet stays financially afloat.

Seek collaborations: Tempo has carried out joint investigations with other media in neighboring countries, Rappler has teamed up with a fact-checking agency, Agência Pública cooperates regularly with NGOs or international media and has a dedicated media relations officer.

Cooperate with dedicated donors or sponsors that meet their standards: FrontPageAfrica managed to attract the biggest telecom operator in Liberia as an advertiser thanks to their quality reporting, Plaza Pública is hosted by a university, Premium Times has created a not-for-profit newsroom to attract funds from international donors.

Invest in capacity building: Tempo, Rappler and Mada Masr are training their own staff in investigative reporting and journalism standards.





Interact with their audience and experiment with new distribution channels: KRIK is using drawings instead of photos on their website, Mada Masr mixes their investigations with recipes, lifestyle pieces and sharp-tongued comics, and Agência Pública set up an interactive website to highlight the plight of those families that lost their home during the construction of the Olympic stadium in Rio de Janeiro.

Make tech an integral part of their work: Whether this is about research techniques or distribution methods. Rappler has been investigating online trolling, Mada Masr continues to distribute their reports via Facebook and VPN despite being blocked by the authorities.

Interact with their audience and build a community that helps to investigate by providing information, protests when the media gets threatened, pays for its products or contributes financially through crowdfunding, such as is the case at Atlatzo.hu.

To build all this, many editors and media owners have spent years accumulating knowledge and contacts, establishing organizational structures and a culture of quality and ethical journalistic standards, either at their current media or in a previous job. None of this is easy. And yet the right combination of journalism, management savviness and creativity can make extraordinary things happen.



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