DW Akademie

Study



DISPLACEMENT AND DIALOGUE ASIA

Media in exile

Resilience mechanisms and survival strategies when covering Afghanistan and Myanmar

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Executive summary

This study explores the resilience and success factors of exile media in Asia, focusing on Afghanistan and Myanmar—two countries where independent journalism has collapsed under authoritarian regimes. Once seen as regional media success stories, both nations have experienced drastic political shifts that forced many journalists and media outlets into exile.

Amid rising global repression and shrinking donor support, understanding how exile media remain viable, independent, and impactful is increasingly urgent. The study identifies key factors that enable media organizations to adapt, survive, and continue serving their communities from abroad. It also offers practical recommendations for exile media, media development actors, donors, and policymakers.

Using a qualitative, comparative case study approach, the research draws on desk reviews, eight interviews, and three focus group discussions conducted between July and September 2025. It examines how exile media navigate challenges related to audience and communities, content and impact measurement, revenue and business models, technology and safety. To protect those still working in-country, participating media organizations remain anonymous.

The findings highlight how Afghan and Myanmar exile media demonstrate resilience through institutional strength, adaptability, and sustained audience trust. Success is defined by operational viability and public impact—offering replicable strategies for other media operating under similar constraints.

Key findings

Audience engagement

Exile media maintain strong in-country presence through local journalists and contributor networks, enabling timely coverage and localized content. Strategic multi-platform distribution helps evade censorship and reinforce trust, especially during crises. Credibility, consistency, and responsiveness to audience needs have strengthened public trust despite exile. Long-established exile media have shown that trust built over decades of independent reporting remains resilient.

Content strategy

Exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar have strategically adapted their editorial focus to address critical information gaps left by suppressed domestic outlets, amplifying underreported topics and diversifying content formats to remain relevant and responsive to audience needs. At the same time, they uphold editorial independence and journalistic integrity under repressive conditions. Through rigorous verification processes, they maintain credibility, and despite limited resources, their reporting continues to influence public discourse, drive humanitarian responses, and gain international recognition.

Revenue models

Media outlets are diversifying income through digital monetization, subscriptions models, memberships, content partnerships such as public service announcement programs (PSA), and service-for-hire models, though donor funding remains essential.

Technology use

Resilience is evident in the use of satellite internet, cloud systems, and power backups to overcome infrastructure challenges such as electricity shortages and internet shutdowns. Media outlets in both countries are experimenting with AI tools for translation, graphic generation, and investigative support, enhancing newsroom efficiency and

output quality. Exile media have strengthened operational resilience by adopting secure communication platforms such as Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp to protect staff and audience interactions.

Safety and security

Integrated physical and digital safety systems protect in-country staff and citizen journalists. Emergency relocation, contingency planning, and cybersecurity measures are standard. Peer-based psychosocial support fosters solidarity and helps manage trauma.

Here are some recommendations for donors, media development organizations and the exile media itself:

Audience and content

- Strengthen citizen journalism networks for local relevance.
- Support multi-platform distribution strategies to maintain visibility.
- Promote audience-centric content models and deepen engagement through feedback tools.

Revenue and innovation

- Provide core funding and tailored support for revenue diversification.
- Balance donor expectations for innovation with operational realities.

Technology and security

- Invest in scalable infrastructure and cybersecurity capacity.
- Fund flexible emergency mechanisms and trauma-informed leadership.
- Support peer-led mental health initiatives rooted in community care.

1. Introduction and background

This study investigates the resilience and success of exile media in Asia in the face of increasing precarity, focusing on Afghanistan and Myanmar, two countries that have experienced dramatic political upheavals and media transformations. The research is situated within a broader context of shrinking civic space, rising authoritarianism, and among the largest waves of journalist displacement in recent years.

The urgency of this study is shaped by several converging factors. The collapse of democratic institutions in both countries has led to the dismantling of media ecosystems. The termination of most United States (US) foreign assistance, which previously sustained many independent media outlets, and the funding reduction of many other donors, has created a funding vacuum that threatens the viability of exile media operations. The COVID-19 pandemic also served as a precursor to deeper structural crises, weakening local media markets and accelerating the need for relocation and adaptation.

Exile media now face a complex set of challenges: navigating transnational operations, maintaining audience engagement across borders, securing financial sustainability, and preserving editorial independence under pressure. These challenges are compounded by the political and logistical realities of exile, such as visa insecurity, high operational costs in host countries, and the psychological toll of displacement.

This study builds on previous research while addressing gaps in existing literature. Through interviews, focus group discussions and desk reviews, the study examines how exile media navigate challenges related to audience and communities, content and impact measurement, revenue and business models, safety and security (physical, digital, and psychosocial), and technology. The study generates evidence-based insights to inform practical recommendations for media houses, media development organizations, and advocacy stakeholders such as donors and policymakers.

1.1 Regional context: Afghanistan and Myanmar

Media development has been a cornerstone of civic transformation in both Afghanistan and Myanmar, two countries that, while often examined together due to their recent political collapses, face distinct challenges shaped by decades of authoritarian rule, conflict, and fragile democratic transitions. In both contexts, independent media once symbolized progress and public engagement, but today they operate under extreme repression or in exile.



In Afghanistan, the post-2001 media boom supported by sustained foreign funding and legal reforms, led to the emergence of one of the most dynamic media ecosystems in the region. Television, radio, and print outlets flourished, even in remote areas. However, the Taliban's return to power in 2021 reversed these gains and forced many journalists into exile. Afghan women are subject to renewed gender apartheid[1] with bans on education, employment, and public visibility. Some of the country's largest media houses now operate under Taliban oversight, while many of their leadership resides abroad. These in-country media houses do not form part of this study. In September 2025, the Taliban regime imposed a ban on

1 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c98jn0ry8jqo

fiberoptic internet across several provinces, citing concerns over "immorality" and then expanded this with a national shutdown of the internet. Although the ban was eventually lifted, the disruption had already impacted on connectivity nationwide. At the same time, a satellite television station operating from abroad told a news channel that their satellite operations had continued.[2]



In Myanmar, the 2010 liberalization allowed exile media to return and rebuild inside the country as the formerly extremely repressive legal regime made way for one of more distinct openness, where media flourished across the country. The 2021 military coup, however, triggered a second wave of displacement. The junta revoked licenses, raided newsrooms, and arrested more than 200 journalists, with 49 still in prisons[3] and at least seven killed. Myanmar now ranks 169th out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index[4]. Rights groups and ethnic media, many of whom have opposed the central government since independence from British rule in 1948, have maintained contingency plans and now operate in "liberated areas" controlled by armed resistance groups. These areas have become footholds for independent media, reducing the alienation of exile and enabling continued civic engagement. Internet shutdowns have become a systematic tool of repression in Myanmar, with authorities implementing 409 documented shutdowns[5] since the February 2021 coup, most of them concentrated in conflict-affected regions.

2 https://www.cnn.com/2025/10/03/asia/afghanistan-internet-shutdown-intl-hnk-dst

3 https://www.icnl.org/post/report/assessing-detentions-of-journalists-in-myanmar

4 https://rsf.org/en/2024-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-under-political-pressure

5 Internet Shutdown | Myanmar Internet https://www.myanmarinternet.info/internet-shutdown

Despite these threats, both countries demonstrate powerful forms of resilience. Exile media rely heavily on networks of established working staff operating in-country, who are supported by a similarly extensive network of stringers, citizen journalists, and diaspora communities. These contributors provide tip-offs, participate in interviews, and help shape content. Their engagement is not only a lifeblood of content production but also a testament to the media's relevance and trustworthiness.

International media development organizations have played a critical role in supporting these efforts. However, the recent termination of most US foreign assistance has created new vulnerabilities, raising urgent questions about sustainability. Sweden had also announced funding cuts, after a reduction in its Official Development Assistance (ODA) budget, which impacts funding from 2026. This affects funding for independent media, among others.

In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, exile media remain among the last civic spaces where diverse communities can engage as equal citizens. They challenge dominant narratives of repression, provide platforms for marginalized voices including women, ethnic minorities, and displaced populations, and continue to foster public discourse under extraordinary conditions.

1.2 Literature review

Recent years have seen growing attention to the role of exile media in sustaining press freedom under authoritarian regimes. Available studies have examined how these media organizations navigate challenges related to audience engagement, financial sustainability, safety, and transnational operations. These reports emphasize that exile journalism is no longer an exception but increasingly a "new normal" in global media landscapes.

Media operating in exile, however, is not a new phenomenon. What is significant about current exile operations is the scope and speed of technological advancements and developments over the past 20 years and what impact this has had on exile media operations. Technology now allows media houses to reach a wide range of their home country's audiences; it enables them to broadcast and publish in real time over a 24-hour cycle, and it also allows real-time interaction with their audience. News is now able to leak from repressive countries quicker and reach a global audience instantaneously, the newsrooms can talk to their reporters working secretly in-country on a daily basis and the news outputs can reach a much wider audience almost

immediately across the world. Exile news organizations are often producing news and information from abroad in a time frame that is close to operating from in-country.

In the context of Afghanistan, the JX Fund's 2024 report[6] offers one of the most comprehensive overviews of Afghan exile media, documenting 47 independent outlets and analyzing their audience reach, content formats, operational models, and approaches to building media resilience. For Myanmar, Internews' *Flight and Fight* report[7] highlights the resilience of exile media operating under extreme constraints. The study details how participating outlets have adapted their operations across borders, using hybrid models that combine remote production, encrypted communications, and underground networks. These organizations have maintained audience trust by prioritizing safety, editorial independence, and cultural relevance. Despite limited resources, these outlets continue to produce impactful journalism, often relying on citizen reporters and diaspora engagement to sustain operations.

Despite these contributions, there is no overall synthesis of the key resilience and success factors that have kept exile media in Asia functional and operational. This study addresses these gaps by focusing specifically on Afghanistan and Myanmar, drawing on contextual knowledge and direct engagement with media actors from both countries. It analyzes resilience and success factors through a structured framework that draws from DW Akademie's Media Viability dimensions,[8] adapted to the research context.

The five dimensions include: **community**, **content** (in this study we included impact measurement of content), **technology**, **economics** (this study focused on revenue and business models rather than the overall economy) and **politics**. Due to the unique overall political situation of exile media, the politics dimension in this study focused on the outlet level, specifically the dynamics to do with safety and security (physical and digital). Nevertheless, while this study focuses on the organizational level of exile media, it also takes into consideration the networks (such as exile media associations) and overall environment that exile media operate in. The study aims to produce practical recommendations for exile media, media development organizations, donors, and policymakers.

6 *https://jx-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/AFG_Media_in_Exile_Research_Report_Updated.pdf?x52396*

7 *https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Flight-and-Fight-Report-Internews-Final.pdf*

8 *https://akademie.dw.com/en/more-than-money-rethinking-media-viability-in-the-digital-age/a-47825791*

Adapted Media Viability dimensions



1.3 Resilience and success

What distinguishes this study is its grounding in the guiding principles of **resilience** and **success**, which while overlapping, are treated as distinct but interrelated concepts.

Resilience: In this study, *resilience* refers to the institutional and structural strength that enables media organizations to withstand threats, adapt to changing environments, and maintain long-term sustainability. It is the foundation that allows outlets to survive periods of crisis without overextending during moments of growth. Resilience is also reflected in the ability of media outlets to maintain credibility and operate with integrity, even when facing pressure to align with political factions or opposition groups. In Myanmar, for example, media independence has had to be maintained not only in opposition to the military regime but also in relation to the growing number of armed resistance groups.

Success: *Success* may be defined differently across organizations, but in this study, it refers to measurable indicators of operational viability and public impact. As of early 2025, the definition of success must be revisited, particularly in light of the termination of most US foreign assistance, which has significantly altered the funding landscape for independent media. Media organizations now face increased pressure to innovate, generate their own revenue, and demonstrate sustainability, often under donor expectations that may not align with the realities of exile media operations.

2. Methodology

To explore the resilience and success factors of exile media organizations in Afghanistan and Myanmar, this study employed a qualitative, comparative case study approach. This methodology was chosen to capture the nuanced experiences of media actors operating under complex and often hostile conditions. By combining desk research, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions, the study aimed to generate rich, context-specific insights while identifying patterns and lessons that may be applicable across similar settings. The study was conducted over a two-and-a-half-month period, from July 16 to September 30, 2025, with data collection taking place between August 12 and September 12, 2025.

The key questions are

- What are the key pillars that enable the success and resilience of exile media organizations from Afghanistan and Myanmar?
- How can these success and resilience factors be replicated, strengthened, and supported by media actors, development organizations, and advocacy stakeholders?

2.1 Data collection methods

Case Studies: Afghanistan and Myanmar were examined as primary case studies, focusing on the operational environments and challenges faced by exile media organizations.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Eight semi-structured online interviews were conducted with representatives from exile media (four from Afghanistan, four from Myanmar). These interviews provided detailed insights into organizational strategies, challenges, and adaptive practices.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):
Three FGDs were conducted:

- One cross-country FGD (in English) covering audience engagement, content, revenue models, and technology.
- One Afghanistan-specific FGD focused on safety and security (in English).
- One Myanmar-language FGD focused on safety and security.

Category	Sample media	Participants	KIIs	FGDs
Total	**10**	**19**	**8**	**3**
Afghanistan	4	8	4	
Myanmar	6	11	4	*Afg 1, MM 1, Cross-country 1*
Notes		*Female 6 (Afg 1, MM 5)*		

Each FGD included three participants to ensure safety, confidentiality, and focused engagement. The cross-country format enabled shared learning, while country-specific discussions allowed for deeper contextual exploration.

Desk research: A comprehensive review of existing literature, reports, and media documentation was conducted to contextualize the operational environments of Afghan and Myanmar exile media. This informed the design of interview and focus group guides and helped identify knowledge gaps.

2.2 Sample selection

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation across a diversity of media types, organizational sizes, and operational contexts. Priority was given to media partners of DW Akademie in both Afghanistan and Myanmar to ensure relevance and access. In the case of Myanmar, the sample was designed to include a mix of national, regional, and ethnic media outlets, reflecting the country's complex media ecosystem. Similar considerations were employed in selecting Afghan media organizations, with additional consideration given to those covering key constituencies/audiences like women; ethnic representivity and a mix of established and newer media organizations. The goal was to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and challenges faced by exile media organizations.

Media outlets were selected based on a working definition of *exile media*, which includes:

- Organizations that operate from outside their home country but maintain active reporting networks inside, often through journalists working undercover.
- Media houses that rely not only on citizen reporters but also on professional journalists who continue to work secretly within the country.
- Outlets that maintain editorial independence and are not influenced by the de facto authorities namely, the Taliban in Afghanistan and the military regime in Myanmar.

This sampling approach aimed to ensure that the study captured the operational realities of exile media while highlighting the resilience and adaptability of organizations committed to independent journalism under authoritarian regimes.

2.3 Limitations of study

While this study provides valuable insights into the resilience and success factors of exile media organizations in Afghanistan and Myanmar, several limitations should be acknowledged. These constraints, both logistical and contextual, influenced the scope and depth of data collection and analysis.

- **Access to Afghan exile media:** The study faced challenges in accessing Afghan exile media due to operational disruptions, limited availability, and non-responsiveness. There was also a limitation around finding a higher number of independent Afghan news media organizations that were consistently operational. Despite repeated outreach efforts, three organizations were unable to participate. This resulted in a smaller sample size for Afghanistan, which may affect the balance of representation between the two country cases.
- **Coordination across time zones:** Researchers had to coordinate with participants located across multiple countries and time zones. Scheduling focus group discussions was particularly challenging, requiring careful planning to identify time slots that worked for all participants. Despite these efforts, some potential participants were unable to join due to time zone differences and scheduling conflicts, which limited the different perspectives in the data collected.
- **Small focus group sizes:** Each focus group discussion was limited to three participants to ensure safety, confidentiality, and focused engagement. While this approach was necessary given the sensitive political contexts, it may limit the generalizability of findings.

Despite these limitations, the study generated rich qualitative data and cross-contextual insights that contribute meaningfully to understanding the operational dynamics of exile media in Asia.

2.4 Ethical considerations

This research was conducted with careful attention to ethical standards, given the sensitive political and security contexts surrounding exile media in Myanmar and Afghanistan. Informed consent was obtained from all participants during interviews and focus group discussions, and confidentiality was strictly maintained through anonymization and secure data handling. Data was stored securely and used solely for research purposes.

The research design accounted for security risks, particularly for journalists operating in-country and in exile. Gender dynamics were considered throughout, with attention to how visibility, safety, and risk intersect with gender. Cultural sensitivity was embedded in both countries' interview compositions to ensure respectful and context-aware engagement.

3. Findings

3.1 Audiences and communities

Audience strategy is a foundational element of resilience and success for exile media operating under authoritarian regimes. Both in Afghanistan and Myanmar, media organizations have developed adaptive, inclusive and trust-building approaches to identify, engage and sustain their audiences. This section synthesizes six key aspects of audience strategy drawing on qualitative data and cross-case analysis.

Audiences of exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar primarily seek independent, timely, credible and locally relevant information, particularly on issues that are underreported or entirely absent from in-country media. This demand is especially acute in environments where press freedom is severely restricted or deliberately suppressed. In these contexts, exile media offer a powerful counter-narrative to state-controlled, compromised outlets as well as media organizations that have remained in-country and adapted their content to align with the repressive regimes. In Afghanistan, exile media serve as an informational lifeline by covering domestic issues with integrity and providing access to topics that are often censored such as women's rights, human rights, and entertainment. In Myanmar, similar dynamics exist. Exile media maintain editorial independence while addressing diverse range of audience needs, including coverage of politics, armed conflict, and security that reflects the situation on the ground.

> ***"Our editorial line remains clear; we focus on topics that local media ... cannot cover. They're restricted from reporting on human rights violations, women's education, or women's participation in society. That's where we come in. It's our responsibility to ensure these stories are told. We concentrate on content that is deliberately silenced inside the country.*** (Afghanistan)

The ways in which audiences access exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar are shaped by a combination of technological availability and censorship constraints. While digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and websites are a common medium in both contexts, the specific modes of access vary significantly between countries and audience segments. Afghanistan audiences primarily access exile media through a combination of satellite television and digital platforms. Content is produced primarily in Pashto and Dari/Farsi, and occasionally in Uzbek, ensuring linguistic accessibility for both in-country viewers and diaspora communities. In Myanmar, exile media rely heavily on digital platforms. However, satellite TV continues to serve older audiences in rural and remote areas, and radio remains relevant in conflict-affected zones and refugee camps. Media outlets also tailor content linguistically, using Myanmar and ethnic languages to reach diverse communities. In both contexts, English-language content is produced to engage international stakeholders. The use of virtual private networks (VPN) is widespread, allowing users to bypass restrictions and access independent news sources. Exile media strategically leverage digital tools to maintain communication with their audiences, despite the challenges posed by authoritarian control over information flows.

Exile media outlets in Afghanistan and Myanmar described that they have built trust through a combination of editorial integrity, audience engagement, local embeddedness, consistent and original reporting, and long-standing

commitment to serving their communities. Despite operating from abroad, these outlets emphasize the importance of maintaining local presence, which allows them to produce original content rather than relying on syndicated sources. Beyond their journalistic role, these media organizations also serve as bridges for humanitarian support, connecting diaspora communities and aid organizations with individuals in need. These functions as reliable sources of information and facilitators of assistance deepen audience relationships.

Exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar actively involve their audiences in content production through citizen contributions and local networks. This reliance stems from limited physical access to their home countries, prompting media outlets to engage local networks and citizen contributors who regularly share updates and stories from within. In addition, audience feedback gathered through digital platforms, surveys, and direct communication also plays a critical role in shaping editorial priorities and ensuring content remains responsive to community needs. This approach not only enhances the relevance of reporting but also fosters trust and accountability.

Exile media organizations in Afghanistan and Myanmar exhibit a strategic understanding of their audience composition. Both have developed nuanced approaches to identifying and segmenting their audiences, shaped by political realities, linguistic diversity, and geographic dispersion. In both contexts, in-country populations who face restricted access to independent information are prioritized as the primary audience. Diaspora communities and international stakeholders form secondary but critical segments. Afghan exile media further refine their targeting through geographic outreach, engaging communities in neighboring countries and across the diaspora in the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Australia. Some outlets also focus on women as a distinct audience group. In Myanmar, audience segmentation is differentiated by organizational mandate, geography, and ethnicity: national media aim for broad coverage, while regional (serving the regions inside Myanmar) and ethnic outlets serve specific communities, including those in refugee camps and border areas. This layered and adaptive approach to audience identification enables exile media to remain relevant, trusted, and responsive across diverse and shifting contexts.

3.1.1 Audience engagement: Navigating risk and building connection

Digital and social media visibility are a key strategy for audience reach and engagement across both countries. Differentiation often occurs in the type of platforms used or accessed and favored by the audience, and the common practices around engagement specific to each country.

In **Afghanistan**, engagement occurs primarily through digital platforms, including social media comments and messaging apps such as WhatsApp. One television station actively engaged its audience through an interactive call-in program. The diaspora audiences actively engage on digital platforms and discuss related topics through comments, and the interactive nature of the programming provides a platform for in-country and diaspora communities to meet and interact on current affairs. However, due to the heightened risk of Taliban surveillance, many audiences choose to engage anonymously or through encrypted channels. Media outlets are acutely aware of these risks and the audiences have adopted a cautious approach to protect, often limiting direct interaction. This careful balance reflects a deep commitment to audience safety while maintaining connection and responsiveness.

In **Myanmar**, audience engagement is diversified. Media outlets interact with audiences through social media, field-based interactions through local journalists inside the country, and community events, particularly in areas controlled by ethnic resistance groups. As swathes of Myanmar country territory is currently controlled by anti-regime and resistance forces, Myanmar media organizations are able to hold events and have interactions with audience members within these territories.

Both Myanmar and Afghanistan are prone to natural disasters. During times of crisis, such as natural disasters, audiences have demonstrated a heightened willingness to engage openly, reflecting both urgency and trust in the media's role. However, many sources prefer not to be identified in published content or footage, reflecting concerns about safety or political sensitivity. The sources are from the local networks, and also audience members who contact the media. Staff working in-country also identify people who the media organizations can speak to. A Myanmar media group who did extensive coverage around the 2025 earthquake (when, anecdotally, people were more willing to be interviewed) said that they blurred interviewees' faces as a precaution. At the same time, media houses are working to ascertain whether and how they could build on

the increased engagement and access they have to home audiences, as demonstrated by engagement during crisis times, including the 2025 earthquake in Myanmar.

Across both contexts, media organizations monitor engagement metrics to better understand audience behavior and preferences. These insights inform editorial decisions and help refine content formats and delivery methods to remain relevant and responsive. Anecdotally, using metrics as a reflection needs to take into account measures that particularly home audiences employ to evade surveillance: this includes women registered under male social media profiles in Afghanistan and audiences in Myanmar creating social media profiles which are not their real names, but which they commonly use.

Afghan and Myanmar media face significant challenges in engaging with their audiences. Surveillance and security risks under the Taliban and Myanmar's military regime limit open interaction and force audiences to adopt cautious, often anonymous, modes of engagement. Infrastructure barriers such as unreliable internet access, electricity cuts, and displacement further restrict connectivity. In Myanmar, political divisions add another layer of complexity; reporting on armed groups can provoke backlash not only from the regime but also from rival factions, making coverage of sensitive issues like human rights violations highly contentious. These constraints shape how media organizations engage with their audiences, requiring careful navigation to maintain trust, safety, and relevance.

3.1.2 Audience feedback: Informing editorial direction

Afghanistan and Myanmar employ similar mechanisms for gathering audience feedback, utilizing a mix of formal and informal channels such as social media interactions, messaging apps, contacting the media organization via their published email addresses, and surveys. In both countries, feedback is additionally gathered through social media comments, citizen journalists, local journalists, digital analytics and informal feedback from community leaders and contributors in the field. Myanmar provides an additional avenue for feedback, whereby they are able to engage in field-based interactions, particularly in areas controlled by the resistance forces.

Recognizing the risks of public engagement under Taliban surveillance, some Afghan media outlets offer secure and anonymous channels, which allows users to submit feedback without revealing their identity.

Audience feedback has a direct impact on content and outputs. Feedback is not only collected, but also actively utilized to adjust content formats and respond to audience preferences and guide editorial decision-making. This input is systematically analyzed to enhance content delivery, with audience suggestions directly influencing topic selection such as expanding coverage in response to repeated requests. In both Myanmar and Afghanistan, the feedback provided has prompted the introduction of new formats, including short video reports, podcasts, and photo-driven storytelling, leading to programmatic innovation and responsiveness. In several outlets, editorial teams routinely review digital analytics and audience feedback during newsroom meetings. These insights have led to strategic shifts, with some outlets recognizing the need to reduce high-volume content production and instead prioritize in-depth analysis, particularly when engagement metrics show declining interest in hard news formats. Additionally, some outlets prioritize content topics that consistently generate strong audience reactions, using audience analytics to guide editorial focus and ensure relevance.

3.1.3 Building and maintaining trust

Editorial integrity and professionalism

Myanmar media outlets highlight their editorial stance and commitment to journalistic standards as key trust-building mechanisms. Prioritizing accuracy over speed, adhering to ethical guidelines, and maintaining fact-based reporting are central to their approach. This principled stance has earned them respect from domestic, diaspora and international audiences, including policymakers and analysts.

Afghan media, while also committed to editorial quality, focus on providing content for which the Taliban have tried to limit information flows around, including human rights, women, music, entertainment, and critical news. This bold editorial strategy resonates with audiences seeking alternative narratives as well as audiences wanting to access a variety of content and topics. At the same time, Afghan media outlets also continue to provide audiences with the varied, diversified and at times, challenging, programming to which they became accustomed during the 20-year period between the two Taliban rules. In this period, entertainment was a key driver of audience growth and retention for media houses within Afghanistan. As such, resistance to authoritarianism also extends to culture and entertainment, since these issues are heavily censored, shaped and at times prohibited by the authorities in Afghanistan.

Audience engagement and responsiveness

Afghan exile media demonstrate active audience engagement, using tools like WhatsApp, call-in shows, and social media to maintain two-way communication. Audiences frequently reach out with information, feedback, and even humanitarian requests, such as diaspora members offering support to families featured in news stories. This responsiveness strengthens the trust bond and positions the media as a bridge between Afghans inside and outside the country.

Myanmar outlets, while less focused on direct interaction, emphasize long-term audience loyalty. Trust is seen as a cumulative asset built over decades, with audiences continuing to rely on these outlets even when they disagree with editorial opinions. This builds on more than two decades of engagement by the Myanmar media, with their credibility and trust of the audience often built when many independent media organizations were originally started in exile. When they were able to move back in-country, they were able to build on that and flourish, thereby leading to strong structures and sustainability which was underpinned by sustained funding. Similarly, Afghan organizations which had a credible track record and establishment within Afghanistan prior to exile, already had a core audience and operational structures when they relocated.

Language accessibility

Publishing in local languages is a shared strategy across both contexts. Afghan media publish content in Dari/Farsi, Pashto, and occasionally Uzbek, while Myanmar outlets produce content in Myanmar and ethnic languages by ethnic media outlets. This linguistic inclusivity not only broadens reach but also deepens cultural resonance, reinforcing trust among diverse audience segments. By continuing to primarily publish in their own languages, the exile media are in effect establishing their role as a national media. The effect of this can be seen in the experience of the Myanmar media before the 2005–2010 changeover. By consistently functioning as an independent voice through decades of regime repression, Myanmar's then-exiled media established the benchmarks for independence and plurality that came to signify the country's media after the political changeover, when the National League for Democracy government and other opposition parties formed the civilian arm of the administration. The exiled media were also quickly able to relocate to in-country and establish themselves as the benchmark for media production in the country, easily eclipsing the military's old propaganda channels and publications.

Media as a bridge for audience-driven support

Beyond their role as information providers, exile media from Afghanistan and Myanmar have demonstrated a unique capacity to mobilize humanitarian support through storytelling. These outlets serve as bridges between vulnerable individuals and diaspora communities, enabling tangible assistance and reinforcing trust in their work. It also attests to the relationship that the audiences have with the media organizations and how the organizations are embedded in the social fabric of their communities.

In Afghanistan, media organizations have reported instances where coverage of hardship—such as stories about families struggling with food insecurity, prompted direct outreach from diaspora audiences. In one example, a story published about a needy family led Afghan diaspora members to contact the outlet, offering financial support and requesting to be connected with those in need. Such responses are described as regular occurrences, highlighting the media's role as a trusted intermediary between Afghans inside the country and those abroad.

Similarly, in Myanmar, a report facilitated life-changing support for individuals affected by conflict. A story about a young widow whose husband and father were both killed in armed clashes, elicited a response from an audience member living abroad. After verifying the donor's background, the news outlet helped facilitate support that enabled the woman to open a small grocery shop, providing her with a sustainable livelihood. This case illustrates how journalism can catalyze real-world impact, transforming audience empathy into direct assistance.

These examples underscore a broader trend: exile media are not only trusted sources of information but also trusted facilitators of solidarity and support. Their ability to connect stories with action enhances their credibility and deepens their relationship with audiences, especially in diaspora communities.

3.1.4 Building a community of supporters

In exile contexts, media organizations face the dual challenge of maintaining operational continuity while remaining connected to their audiences. One of the most powerful strategies for resilience is community-building not just in terms of audience size, but in fostering meaningful relationships, mutual support, and shared purpose.

The exile media demonstrate a strong reliance on their audiences for news gathering and content generation, particularly due to their limited physical access to the country. Audiences inside the home countries regularly share updates, reports, and local stories, effectively acting as citizen contributors. In parallel, diaspora communities actively support media efforts, especially during protests and advocacy campaigns, by providing declarations, videos, and other materials for publication. This participatory model has become a cornerstone of community-building, enabling exile media to remain responsive, relevant, and trusted.

Community-building is also reflected in the mutual recognition between media and their audiences. Afghan outlets have received certificates of appreciation from women activists, acknowledging their role in amplifying voices and advocating for rights. This reciprocity strengthens emotional bonds and reinforces the media's legitimacy as a trusted ally, where media outlets serve as connectors across diverse social and political groups.

In Myanmar, ethnic media outlets maintain strong ties with ethnic communities, particularly along border regions. These communities are seen not only as audiences but also as strategic allies, regularly consulted to ensure content remains relevant and grounded in local realities. Through localized storytelling, Myanmar media build loyalty by covering stories from small villages and minority regions—transforming overlooked communities into dedicated supporters.

Community-building efforts also extend beyond journalism. Myanmar outlets have initiated media literacy workshops in high schools and refugee camps along the border areas, and hosted community seminars. These initiatives reflect a commitment to empowerment and capacity-building, positioning media outlets not only as information providers but also as facilitators of civic engagement and awareness.

3.1.5 Audience reach and platforms

Afghan and Myanmar exile media have adopted multi-platform strategies and have expanded their audience reach across both domestic and diaspora populations. These strategies have been developed often in direct response to the media houses being forced into exile and losing their traditional publishing platforms, whether these were print media, domestic television, radio or a combination of these.

Both Afghan and Myanmar outlets operate across a wide range of digital platforms, including websites, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube, Telegram, WhatsApp, Threads, and are planning expansion into TikTok to reach younger audiences. Myanmar media outlets are already experimenting with content on TikTok but often don't employ WhatsApp. Across both contexts, Facebook remains the most widely used and effective platform though they express concern about algorithmic suppression and content moderation. They also maintain dedicated English-language channels to engage international stakeholders. These platforms serve as substitutes for the audience reach that media outlets once had in their home countries. However, both Afghan and Myanmar media acknowledge the limitations of platform dependency, particularly under restrictive algorithms and increasing censorship.

Afghan exile media have cultivated a broad and diverse audience, both inside the country and across the global Afghan diaspora. Platforms such as satellite television and social media have enabled them to reach millions. Satellite television has built on the success of two decades of domestic television within Afghanistan, which established viewership patterns and program and viewer sophistication. Television is also a ready medium to cut through the high rates of illiteracy in Afghanistan and media organizations have said that satellite technology enables broadcasters to mitigate the mountainous and remote terrain of large swathes of the country.

Myanmar media report strong digital reach, particularly through Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram. Satellite TV was once a major platform for reaching rural and remote audiences, especially those without internet access. Although the Television and Video Law now restricts satellite broadcasting, older, rural and remote audiences continue to use PSI satellite dishes to access independent exile satellite television channels, despite security risks. This underscores the continued relevance of satellite television in Myanmar.

For Afghanistan's exile media, the use of satellite television remains a critical tool for bypassing Taliban censorship. As a free-to-air, externally hosted broadcast, satellite TV allows Afghan media to reach audiences in every corner of the country, regardless of internet access or government restrictions. This model has proven highly effective in the Afghan context. Satellite TV is also popular and long-established within Myanmar, despite the authorities attempts to stop people watching the exile broadcasters. The use of satellite television as a challenge to repression and internal censorship echoes the early media

development of exile Myanmar media organizations in the 1990s and 2000s, whereby the few satellite broadcasts that were available found a ready and dedicated audience in-country, not only for news, but also for entertainment and cultural programs, which provided a counter-narrative to the military government's ideological programming.

When broadcasters face internet blackouts or outages, there are limited strategies which they can employ. It also is dependent on the specifics of the internet cuts and shutdowns: in Myanmar and Afghanistan, these have ranged from mobile data being blocked; to fiberoptic shutdowns; to (in the case of Afghanistan in September 2025) complete national shutdowns. In areas of Myanmar where there has been restricted internet, it has also depended on the geographic area covered: i.e. a few townships or outlying districts, or whether it included key commercial capitals. Local people rely on solar power where they have access to it and in some instances, there is the possibility of connection through commercial satellite internet links.

For Myanmar exile media, they have experimented with FM and shortwave radio to reach hard-to-access communities, including IDP camps and ethnic regions. FM radio remains a vital tool in some of Myanmar's ethnic states, where local media organizations have shared content with community radio stations. Afghanistan, on the other hand, has an extensive in-country local radio network. Shortwave radio, once abandoned, is being reconsidered in Myanmar as a fallback option during emergencies, especially in areas affected by internet shutdowns and electricity blackouts. However, technical and infrastructure barriers such as the lack of transmitters and radio devices limit their scalability.

3.1.6 Citizen journalism

In the face of restricted access, surveillance, and logistical constraints, exile media organizations have adopted citizen journalism as a key operational strategy to maintain coverage and relevance. By empowering ordinary individuals to contribute news and information, media outlets from Afghanistan and Myanmar have built decentralized networks that extend their reach and enhance their resilience.

Citizen journalists take risks on behalf of the organization; believe in the mission of the media outlets and understand the importance of continued reporting on the news across their country, despite the real threats and safety concerns to them.

Afghan media outlets introduced citizen journalism schemes immediately after relocating into exile. These initiatives have enabled individuals inside the country to send voice recordings, photos, videos, and text through various digital platforms.

This approach not only fills reporting gaps on the ground but also fosters a sense of shared responsibility and ownership among the audience. Media teams actively encourage citizens to report on events in their communities, reinforcing a participatory ethos that strengthens both trust and operational continuity.

Following the 2021 changeover in both countries, however, many of these networks were disrupted due to security risks and displacement inside the country. As a result, media organizations introduced training programs for citizen journalists and built their citizen journalist base from scratch. In many cases, emergency relocation within the country has been necessary for citizen journalists who face imminent threats, underscoring the vulnerability of this model and the need for flexible support systems.

What factors have led to resilience and success as regards audiences and communities?

Resilience in audience engagement stems from the ability to **adapt communication practices to high-risk environments**. Afghan media demonstrate this through encrypted and anonymous communication channels, cautious interaction, and the use of journalist intermediaries to protect audience identities. Myanmar outlets show similar encrypted and anonymous methods and diversified ways of engagement through social media, field-based engagement, leveraging community trust and local networks to maintain engagement with audiences.

Maintaining a significant in-country presence has been a key resilience factor for both Afghan and Myanmar media. This is despite both being in exile (often operating from different locations) as well as working in a context where, in the case of Afghanistan, many larger media houses have chosen to stay within Afghanistan and work in cooperation with the Taliban authorities.

Strategic use of multi-platforms: The use of multi-platform digital engagement is more than a publishing choice. As demonstrated by media from both Afghanistan and Myanmar, this engagement has been a strategic way in which to evade repression and censorship; ensure their foothold in the public space and to push the boundaries of censorship and restrictions in times of national crisis.

Ability to embed audience feedback into editorial workflows and content planning: In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, the exile media have displayed being responsive to audience feedback and their ability to embed audience feedback into editorial workflows and content planning, not only enhancing their relevance but also strengthening trust and accountability within the communities they serve. Audience engagement, therefore, remains a cornerstone of resilient and responsive media practice.

Strengthening trust under pressure: In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, exile media have demonstrated that trust can be strengthened under repression, displacement, and crisis. Their ability to remain connected to local voices, respond to audience needs, and uphold journalistic integrity is a testament to their resilience and relevance.

Trust as a cumulative asset built over time: Long-established Myanmar exile media exemplify how trust cultivated over decades of consistent and independent reporting, becomes a durable asset. Even when editorial perspectives diverge from audience views, these outlets retain loyalty and reliance. This long-term trust reflects a testament to the success of sustained engagement strategies that prioritize integrity and credibility above alignment.

Ability to mobilize and empower audiences for news gathering: Both Afghan and Myanmar media demonstrate strength and resilience through citizen journalism networks, local contributors, and strategic partnerships with local communities, ethnic groups, and civil society. They sustain coverage from within their countries and across diaspora populations and through strategic partnerships with local, ethnic communities and civil society. These approaches enable real-time reporting and localized content creation under extreme constraints.

Independent outputs: Editorial independence and consistent independent coverage has been a key and critical factor for both resilience and success in both Afghanistan and Myanmar. Myanmar's independent media who grew up in exile from around 1990 and then established themselves in-country post-2005, had long had experience of the importance of defending the space for independent reporting, including independence from anti-government forces and formations. The Afghan exile media have had to make a clear decision on whether they stay independent and non-partisan, even in the face of strong anti-Taliban opposition by their audience and supporters. Staying independent has usually meant relocating to continue working from abroad.

Credibility of outputs and news and information as a way to build trust in coverage and organization: Consistency in the news outlets' coverage has been a keen driver for success, including in audience growth and audience retention.

Continued visibility of the organization, even while in exile and in-country: The continued visibility of the media organization is seen most evidently through their coverage and their ability to cover stories and to be the focus of information for their specific regular audiences, and for anybody who is interested in news from either Afghanistan or Myanmar. The visibility is the result of the large reporters' footprint that they have; the ability to mobilize community journalists, freelancers and staff, while also having an in-country audience ready to supply them with news and information.

3.2 Content

Exile media organizations from Afghanistan and Myanmar operate under extraordinary constraints: political repression, displacement, and limited access to their home countries. Yet, they continue to produce impactful journalism and content that informs, engages, and influences audiences and institutions.

Exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar have adapted their editorial focus to fill the void left by suppressed in-country media outlets. Afghan media emphasize women's rights and entertainment content excluded by Taliban rule, while Myanmar outlets prioritize conflict reporting and explore alternative governance narratives amid ongoing civil war. These shifts reflect a strategic response to authoritarian collapse and a commitment to informing and empowering affected populations. Exile media in both Afghanistan and Myanmar have developed hybrid operational models and transnational reporting networks to maintain journalistic continuity. The media outlets operate under intense pressure, with journalists often overwhelmed and multitasking across editorial, technical, and managerial roles. This strain reflects both the scarcity of qualified personnel and the urgency of maintaining daily coverage under crisis conditions. Despite these challenges, media outlets continue to produce consistent content, underscoring the resilience and dedication of their teams.

While training opportunities exist for exile media from Afghanistan and Myanmar, gaps remain particularly in areas such as digital innovation, technological skills, media business development and citizen journalism. Afghan

media outlets emphasize the urgent need for capacity building, especially in the absence of formal journalism education and amid systemic barriers for women and marginalized groups. In contrast, Myanmar's media benefit from more structured partnerships with regional actors, enabling access to training and skills development. However, technical and strategic training needs persist, underscoring the importance of sustained and context-sensitive support mechanisms.

Networking and collaboration serve as critical lifelines for exile media, offering not only operational support but also emotional and strategic solidarity. In Afghanistan, media outlets maintain regular contact with peers both in exile and within the country, fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. Collaborations with international platforms amplify Afghan voices on the global stage, while joint initiatives with regional media demonstrate the value of resource-sharing and cross-context learning. Myanmar's media landscape reflects a more formalized and strategic approach to collaboration. Long-standing partnerships with ethnic media associations, memoranda of understanding with Myanmar regional outlets, and training collaborations with host-country media institutions illustrate a deliberate use of networking to strengthen capacity and reach. Specific regional initiatives supporting these activities exemplify how regional solidarity can be translated into joint content production, audience engagement, and organizational resilience.

Editorial independence is respected at the organizational level and supported by donors and media development organizations. However, internal dynamics such as political pressures or resource constraints may complicate the full autonomy of individual journalists, who operate under extreme repression.

Content is increasingly multilingual, with efforts to include minority languages and voices in both Afghanistan and Myanmar exile media. Myanmar's ethnic media collaborations ensure linguistic representation, while Afghan outlets strive to include diverse ethnic perspectives despite structural inequalities.

Both Afghan and Myanmar exile media prioritize inclusion, working to ensure that women, ethnic minorities, and other marginalized communities are represented within their staffing and editorial content. However, persistent structural barriers continue to hinder full participation. In Afghanistan, gender-based restrictions and wider minority discrimination limit access to resources and opportunities. Despite these challenges, Afghan media demonstrate a commitment to inclusive coverage and strive to reflect diverse voices across their platforms. Myanmar's media landscape shows more consistent integration, particularly of women, into both staffing and content production. Nonetheless, disparities in access and resource distribution remain, highlighting the ongoing need for targeted support and structural reform to ensure equitable participation across both contexts.

Contingency planning and mutual aid are embedded in organizational strategies. Myanmar outlets emphasize strategic rebuilding and structures to withstand shocks, while media from both countries advocate for donor engagement and reform to support long-term sustainability. These approaches reflect a shared understanding that survival requires not just funding, but solidarity and systemic support.

Exile media outlets continue to uphold editorial values rooted in democracy, free speech, and the rule of law. Forced into exile and often losing access to their established print formats, many have adapted by shifting to digital platforms. This transition has led to experimentation with new content formats, including short-form video, which is particularly effective in reaching audiences with limited time, literacy, or internet bandwidth. These digital strategies reflect both a response to technological constraints and a commitment to maintaining accessibility and relevance for diverse audience groups.

Being exiled has challenged media houses to respond through content modification and variation. They have also been challenged to meet changing realities on the ground, including by responding to natural disasters across both countries.

Exile has enabled both Afghan and Myanmar's exile media to uphold editorial independence, maintaining journalistic ethics amid the censorship of their respective authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, however, the reliance on in-country networks including journalists, citizen reporters, and sources means that safety, retaliation, and repression remain constant concerns. Afghan outlets remain neutral across ethnic divides, while Myanmar media navigate pressures from political divides both the regime and opposition forces in some cases.

As highlighted in *section 3.1.3* on Language Accessibility as a factor in building and maintaining trust, publishing in local and ethnic languages not only strengthens audience trust but also reflects a strategic editorial choice that deepens cultural relevance and reinforces national identity.

For the exile media, demonstrating a firm commitment to journalistic ethics has been key to resilience and survival in exile. It has also been a firm driver of the identity of individual outlets as well as the collective identity of the more prominent exile media groupings and formations.

In response to widespread disinformation and deliberate information suppression by authoritarian regimes, exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar have prioritized robust verification practices. Myanmar media described their operational approach as a "one-foot-in, one-foot-out strategy." Newsrooms practice a two-tier system: having in-country reporters who do on-the-ground reporting and then a set of editors who operate from exile; when comment is needed from regime figures, the staff in exile seek the comments and newsrooms often have multiple reporters in a location, including for protection, so that stories cannot be traced to just one reporter. Their credibility hinges on trusted reporting, prompting the integration of multi-source fact-checking systems within their newsrooms to counter manipulation and maintain audience trust.

Exile media organizations in both Afghanistan and Myanmar assess their impact through a combination of audience engagement metrics, such as viewership and social media reactions, as well as more qualitative indicators to observe tangible outcomes including policy influence, humanitarian outcomes, shifts in public discourse, and recognition by international institutions. This multi-dimensional approach allows media organizations to assess not only how widely their content is consumed, but also how meaningfully it contributes to social and political change. Exile media coverage likely provides the only consistent public record that can be accessed and trusted, and that reflects the news and priorities of what is happening in either country. Their coverage provides a historical record and is essential for tracking abuses within the country and being able to collate a record of notes for later use.

3.2.1 Editorial focus and content strategy

Both Afghan and Myanmar exile media have strategically shifted their editorial priorities to reflect the changed political circumstances within their home countries and to fill the void left by censored or collapsed domestic media. For both countries, responding to the current situation in-country has meant an editorial focus prioritizing human rights, restrictions, reporting on humanitarian issues and challenges and continued restriction.

The specific differentiation in content is reflected in Afghanistan having a specific focus on women's rights and news and current affairs focusing on women as well as entertainment topics deliberately excluded from Taliban-controlled media.

The sustained and expanding conflict engulfing Myanmar has made reporting on the conflict a key focus on Myanmar's media, especially as the regime's campaign against its citizens through a sustained war, has devastating and daily impacts on the exile media outlets' audiences. The Myanmar media have also started reflecting internal debates around what options for governance exist outside of the current military-imposed structures.

While news, current affairs and debate are important drivers of the outlets' editorial outputs in both Myanmar and Afghanistan's exile media, content production is deliberately more diversified than simply reporting on news and atrocities by the current governments. The years of political change in both countries allowed audiences to be exposed to a range of programs in their media, thereby leading to a degree of audience sophistication that looks to the exile independent media to continue that role.

3.2.2 Editorial independence and ethical journalism

Exile media vigorously defend their editorial independence, while at the same time operating firmly within the contexts and an audience base which is often firmly opposed to the regimes back home. Even while exile media have concentrated and been challenged by the demands of establishing themselves abroad, they have inevitably had to have internal discussions and considerations on whether they take a public political stance against their home regimes. This has been further complicated for Myanmar's exile media, because they have also had to develop an identity and content outputs that reflect their independence from the resistance political formations as well. Myanmar media uphold editorial independence, often in the face of pressure from both regime and resistance groups. For Afghanistan's exile media, being non-partisan has included maintaining an editorial stance that treats different ethnic groups and power relations in a non-partisan way in coverage.

Being established in exile has meant an overwhelming dependence on foreign funding for both countries' media. Newsroom leaders and organizational founders mentioned that receiving money from Western-based donors enabled

them to pursue an editorial policy that had independence and a commitment to democratic values at the forefront of their coverage, content, and operational values. The recent drastic funding cuts and dramatic changes in the political climate have had a knock-on effect on the ability of these media outlets to effectively hold the democratic space within their own countries and regions.

3.2.3 Fact-checking and verification system

Newsrooms work on getting the facts right. For the exile media, this has been challenged by working in information black holes, from countries where the free flow of information is impeded or even criminalized and where the exile media are criminalized for their operations.

Misinformation and disinformation, fueled by rapid digital communication, has intensified the need for rigorous fact-checking for both countries' exile media. The media organizations' credibility relies on their coverage being trusted. Therefore, verification is a key way in which they will be challenged by the regimes back home. This is also while operating in contexts where blocking information; denials and deliberately not confirming issues of importance are used as a tool by the respective regimes to control and manipulate information to the outside world. For the exile media organizations from Afghanistan and Myanmar, this has meant installing verification systems as part of their newsroom operations that relies on multiple sources and origins of verification.

Verification and fact-checking have therefore been augmented as operational imperatives and are a core feature of how the public can assess the editorial priorities for the Afghan and Myanmar exile media. Media outlets describe a double-layered system, where in-country reporters verify information, and external editors conduct additional checks. This double-layered approach, while essential for credibility, requires more time and staff effort.

> ***We carefully assess the potential impact of each story, especially regarding security and quality. Even when information is verified, we consider whether publishing it could cause harm. Timeliness matters, but so does responsibility.*** (Myanmar)

The media houses also consider the possibility of retaliation and sources being identified before releasing information, reflecting an ethical commitment to minimizing harm while maintaining transparency. *(See 3.5.1)*

In both contexts, verification is treated not merely as a technical step but also as a deliberate editorial practice that reinforces credibility and trust in hostile and fragmented media landscapes.

3.2.4 Impact measurement and influence

Exile media organizations in both Afghanistan and Myanmar assess their impact through a combination of audience engagement metrics, such as viewership and social media reactions, as well as more qualitative indicators to observe tangible outcomes including policy influence, humanitarian outcomes, shifts in public discourse, and recognition by international institutions. This multi-dimensional approach allows media organizations to assess not only how widely their content is consumed, but also how meaningfully it contributes to social and political change.

> ***We've adapted our content and formats to match the diverse needs and habits of our audiences. Since many use different platforms and may not have time to read long articles, we focus on producing short videos. This way, even in just a few minutes, they can stay informed about what's happening inside the country.*** (Afghanistan)

The impact of content and coverage extends beyond the exile media providing one of the few large-scale, consistent, daily records of what has been happening in their countries. The reporting of the exile media houses provides a public record that has been accessed by international organizations and international mechanisms and other interested parties. This is a secondary function of the content, but one which is crucial for the historical life of both countries.

Independent news reporting from Afghanistan and Myanmar are also regularly cited in international reports. Afghanistan's exile media have been cited by international bodies including the UN Human Rights Special Rapporteur, and the US Department of State, underscoring their credibility and relevance.

Exile media coverage has also facilitated public debates on their feedback forums, including in Afghanistan where the Taliban's 2024 "Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice" law triggered vigorous debate in the feedback forums of exile media houses. In addition, humanitarian reporting has prompted NGO inquiries and direct aid to affected families.

Myanmar exile media have similarly demonstrated impact across multiple dimensions. Their reporting on displacement, conflict and its impacts has mobilized donor engagement and facilitated direct aid delivery. Coverage of environmental issues and their social impacts has sparked national conversations and community resistance, reflecting the media's role in shaping public discourse.

Despite these successes, both Afghan and Myanmar media face significant challenges in measuring impact and assessing influence. This is keeping in mind that direct feedback to media organizations carries risks and security consequences for their audience. Nevertheless, even indirect responses such as regime denials, policy adjustments, or shifts in public sentiment, are interpreted as meaningful indicators of influence. These experiences highlight the complex but essential role of exile media in not only informing audiences but also shaping outcomes in highly restrictive environments.

What factors have led to resilience and success as regards content?

Upholding editorial independence: Exile has enabled media outlets in Afghanistan and Myanmar to operate free from direct authoritarian control, despite massive operational restrictions. This has allowed them to uphold editorial independence while adapting to rapidly shifting political and technological environments. Their commitment to democratic values and journalistic integrity remains central, even as they navigate political pressures and operational uncertainty.

Content diversification and format adaptability: Both Afghanistan and Myanmar exile media have strategically diversified their editorial focus, moving beyond political reporting to fill critical information voids left by censored domestic media and local regimes who impede access to information. Excluded topics such as women's rights, entertainment, and conflict reporting are covered by exile media.

Audience-centric planning: Editorial strategies are increasingly shaped by audience feedback and structured frameworks. This approach ensures that content is not only relevant but also responsive to the evolving expectations of a more sophisticated and engaged public.

Rigorous verification systems: Fact-checking is treated as both a technical and ethical imperative. Media outlets verify information from various sources and editors employ a rigorous operational process to facilitate local verification with editorial oversight.

Adaptive operations: Exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar sustain journalism through hybrid models and transnational networks. These structures enable continuity despite displacement and censorship, ensuring access to in-country sources and audiences.

Strategic collaboration: Networking provides both operational and emotional support. Afghan media rely on informal peer connections and global partnerships, while Myanmar outlets use formal collaborations to strengthen capacity and reach.

Contingency and mutual aid: In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, contingency planning is embedded within the strategies of long-standing and experienced exile media organizations. Myanmar outlets particularly emphasize adaptable operational models designed to absorb shocks and maintain continuity.

Impact through engagement and influence: Despite operational constraints and limited resources, both Afghan and Myanmar exile media sustain strong audience engagement and have achieved tangible influence. Their reporting has led to humanitarian responses, shifts in policy debates, and international recognition. Even indirect reactions such as regime denials or shifts in public discourse are seen as meaningful indicators of impact.

3.3 Revenue generation and business models

The growth and success stories of the Afghan and Myanmar media through the past two decades has been facilitated by access to foreign funding, as well as relatively stable local markets, when the media have been able to establish themselves in-country. Now, however, exile media from Afghanistan and Myanmar operate within deeply constrained economic environments shaped by authoritarian governance, conflict, and systemic collapse. The fall of their respective governments in 2021 led to

the disintegration of local revenue ecosystems including advertising, print sales, and diversified business models, forcing a rapid and near-total shift toward external funding. Internal markets that once supported media through local partnerships and commercial revenue have also collapsed.

Surveillance and financial repression further compound these challenges. Financial transactions, both domestic and international, are closely monitored, with individuals and accounts subject to scrutiny. This creates significant risks for media organizations and their supporters, discouraging donations and limiting the ability to process payments. These infrastructure barriers reinforce reliance on external donors and informal financial networks, undermining efforts to build independent revenue systems.

Currently, Afghan and Myanmar exile media rely heavily on donor funding as their primary source of income. This dependency is a direct consequence of exile, which severed access to previously diversified business models, access to local markets, local advertising, and print-based revenue. A growing concern across both contexts is the reduction in donor support, including cuts from major funders such as USAID and other international donors, such as Sweden.

Content-related challenges also hinder revenue generation. Reporting on conflict, human rights violations, and political repression, which are core outputs of exile media, is frequently flagged by technology platforms under community standards. This limits visibility and restricts eligibility for monetization, particularly on platforms like YouTube and Facebook.

Exile media have begun experimenting with monetization strategies, though dependable revenue streams remain elusive. Some outlets plan to segment specialized content for diaspora and international audiences, while continuing to offer free access to domestic audiences. This approach reflects both economic realities and a commitment to public service.

To navigate financial and operational constraints, exile media organizations have adopted creative strategies: shifting focus to diaspora communities who are more able and willing to provide financial support; establishing foreign bank accounts to facilitate international donations and transactions; using third-party platforms and intermediaries to process payments and reduce exposure to surveillance; and maintaining free access for domestic audiences, while monetizing content for international users. These efforts demonstrate innovation and adaptability, though they have yet to yield consistent or substantial revenue.

> ***We have a few initiatives for different revenue streams. One is our public service announcement initiative, supported by a business coach from one of our donors. We approach NGOs [non-governmental organizations], embassies, and CSOs [civil society organizations] to run media campaigns—like landmine awareness—on our platform. It's not a grant but a media service model. Another is a subscription for our monthly report, previously shared for free but now available for a small fee. We also collaborate with international media on environmental reporting, which brings in some revenue. And we've started a membership model for migrant audiences. So, we now have three revenue streams that are not grant-based.*** (Myanmar)

While donor support has been essential for survival, it also presents limitations, including short-term funding cycles, dependency risks, and constraints on long-term planning.

Despite these constraints, exile media have pursued diverse revenue strategies:

- **Targeting diaspora and international audiences** as more viable sources for monetization.
- **Implementing subscription model**s that offer premium content to international users while maintaining free access for domestic audiences.
- **Launching fundraising campaigns** tied to major events and supported directly by audiences.
- **Exploring digital monetization** through platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok, particularly among Myanmar outlets, though returns remain modest.
- **Providing service-based offerings** including public service announcement (PSA) production, content creation for NGOs and studio leasing; and
- **Developing membership programs** to strengthen audience relationships and supplement donor income.

However, most outlets report limited success in generating dependable revenue streams.

3.3.1 Financial sustainability challenges

The cessation of almost all US foreign funding, as well as continued donor reductions across other countries, have had an immediate and severe impact on the current operations of media houses, as well as for their longer-term planning and operations.

These reductions have led to budget shortfalls, program discontinuation, staff layoffs, and increased uncertainty about long-term sustainability. The shift toward short-term, project-based grants further undermines strategic planning and organizational resilience.

Despite differing levels of capacity and experimentation, both Afghan and Myanmar exile media share a common challenge: the lack of stable, independent revenue sources and the increasing fragility of donor-driven funding models. Without renewed and sustained support, these financial pressures threaten not only operational continuity but also the long-term viability of independent journalism in exile.

3.3.2 Infrastructure barriers

The political transitions in Afghanistan and Myanmar in 2021 triggered widespread economic collapse and severely disrupted access to functional banking and financial infrastructure. While formal international sanctions vary in scope and application, both countries now operate under conditions of heightened financial scrutiny and repression, particularly targeting individuals and organizations perceived to be affiliated with exile media or international entities.

In both contexts, financial surveillance is pervasive. Authorities closely monitor banking activity to identify recipients of foreign funds, often accusing them of collaborating with opposition, foreign governments or media organizations deemed hostile to the regime. This climate of suspicion has created an effect on financial support for independent media. Personal and institutional bank accounts face intense surveillance, making both local and international wire transfers risky. This prevents legitimate organizations from accessing or distributing funds without fear of reprisal.

3.3.3 Revenue generation strategies

As outlined above, exile media organizations in both Afghanistan and Myanmar are navigating complex financial landscapes shaped by displacement, repression, and significant economic downturn. However, they are actively pursuing revenue generation strategies that reflect both innovation and resilience. Both countries' exile media continue to face significant challenges in generating sustainable, independent revenue. They operate in environments where the ability to raise funds domestically is severely impacted because of poverty, surveillance, and infrastructure collapse. This includes the reluctance of audiences to "like" or share online content of exile media, because of official surveillance and the risks that it carries.

Exile has meant that both countries have lost their in-country audiences and related businesses as key parts of their former revenue generation strategy. The political circumstances which drove the exile media from their country has also displaced a significant portion of their audience as well. In-country audiences have been affected by the resultant (often severe) economic consequences inside the home countries.

A key restrictive factor in revenue generation is that both Afghanistan and Myanmar's exile media cannot rebuild their domestic audiences as a source of revenue. Both countries have undergone severe economic downturns following the political changeovers and restrictions around banking. This, in conjunction with surveillance and the criminalization of the independent exile media have combined to have significant impacts. Both Afghan and Myanmar exile media recognize the financial limitations of their in-country audiences, not only in terms of monetization potential but also their inability to contribute financially to media organizations. Furthermore, Afghan media outlets report that their avoidance of sensationalist content impacts their ability to attract high-traffic engagement that could boost monetization.

In response, outlets in both contexts are exploring ways to strategically focus on diaspora communities and international audiences as more viable sources of revenue. Both countries' media are also aware that there does not exist a standard media business model for engaging diaspora communities which they can implement.

Therefore, media organizations are exploring a range of approaches:

- Some media outlets developed subscription-based models that monetize premium content for international users, while keeping access free for domestic audiences due to widespread poverty.
- Individual fundraising campaigns, particularly tied to major events, which have garnered some interest and success for the media who implemented it.
- Monetization of content on digital platforms, particularly through YouTube and Facebook, is a growing area of focus. Myanmar media plan to develop and grow their monetization mainly on YouTube, Facebook and TikTok.

> ***"Around 10 percent of our revenue now comes from social media and digital/audience monetization. Since late last year, we've been working to expand self-generated income and aim to increase it over the next 2–3 years … We're currently operating under a hybrid business model that combines donor funding with growing self-generated revenue.*** (Myanmar)

However, both countries are constrained by the nature of their content (e.g., conflict reporting) and the geographic location of their audience, which impacts monetization. Afghan media organizations say that monetization of text-based content remains largely ineffective, and digital revenue from platforms like YouTube continue to be minimal.

- Membership programs (mostly with Myanmar media), subscriptions, and fundraising campaigns are being used to supplement donor income and build direct relationships with their audiences.
- Some Myanmar media have secured contracts to produce public service announcements (PSAs), usually for NGOs and INGOs, offering that aligns with their editorial direction.
- Studio leasing and service-based income, such as content production services for partners are also being explored by some Myanmar media as alternative income sources, though these still account for a small portion of total operating costs.

Both Afghan and Myanmar exile media face significant challenges in monetizing digital content, particularly through global platforms like YouTube and Facebook. Myanmar media report limited digital revenue generated on the platforms, but they still face significant barriers, including the geographic location of their audience. Afghan outlets report minimal financial returns from these platforms, especially for text-based content, which tends to perform poorly in monetization algorithms compared to video formats.

3.3.4 Business development support

Exile media organizations in both Afghanistan and Myanmar face significant challenges in developing sustainable business models in exile. Media outlets from both countries have engaged in regional learning exchanges facilitated by international media organizations, which have provided valuable opportunities for peer learning and exposure to new business models.

The media organizations also point out the ineffectiveness of generic media business development workshops and support programs, which often fail to address the specific operational realities of media working under displacement, surveillance, and financial constraints. As a result, there is a pressing need for tailored business development support that reflects the unique political, economic, and institutional conditions exile media now operate within.

In Afghanistan, many media outlets are either newly established or restructured in exile, having previously operated within a relatively thriving domestic market. These organizations now face a steep learning curve in navigating financial systems and business development planning.

Myanmar media outlets have been more aggressive in seeking and applying business development strategies. This is partly due to their pre-existing engagement with international organizations prior to 2021, which provided exposure to business planning, and collaboration. Since going into exile, many Myanmar outlets have continued to participate in expert consultations, and collaborative planning efforts, enabling them to develop more context-specific and adaptive business models.

Despite these differences, both contexts share a common need: business support that is customized, practical, and sensitive to the constraints of operating in exile. This does not preclude the importance of donor-supported funding to enable their survival. This includes guidance on revenue

diversification, financial planning under surveillance, and strategic audience engagement—particularly with diaspora communities and international supporters.

What factors have led to resilience and success in revenue generation and business models?

Despite the inherent difficulties that the exile media face in building feasible and ultimately sustainable revenue generation and business models, they are instituting practices that contribute to the resilience factors that keep their organizations viable and functional.

Revenue strategies: Media organizations are exploring revenue generation strategies that would draw increasingly on their diaspora and international audiences. This is already reflected in the small-scale donations and fundraising efforts, as well as diaspora/international audience responsiveness to in-country audiences in need. Experimentation with various revenue strategies such as paywall programs, membership programs, service-based income, and the production of public service announcements in partnership with international organizations offer replicable models for other exile media seeking financial sustainability.

Experimenting with digital platform-based revenue streams: Platform-based monetization remains a source of engagement and of growth. This, however, will be determined by the policies and practices of technology giants and how their monetization policies are implemented. Engaging technology companies would be a strategic way to influence ways in which platform monetization can be more supportive of exile media.

Donor funding as a lifeline: Donor funding, although increasingly fragile and short-term, remains a critical lifeline that has enabled exile media outlets to survive, maintain operations and continue serving their audiences. Within the confines of restricted revenue, exile media organizations have had to pivot to the almost total reliance on donor funding as the most significant part of funding. But media organizations are also exploring other streams of income generation.

Financial workarounds: To overcome infrastructure and surveillance barriers, media outlets have developed financial workarounds such as the use of foreign bank accounts and third-party services to bypass surveillance and financial restrictions.

3.4 Technology

Technology and recent technological advancements have been a key driver behind the ability of media in exile to function, reach audiences and be able to connect audiences and reporters globally, while at the same time being able to mask or hide identities of contributors. It has provided engagement with home and diaspora audiences and enabled exile media houses to function and publish as soon as they establish in exile.

Exile has compelled media organizations to rely heavily on digital platforms and technological tools to reach audiences. Unlike their previous domestic operations, which benefited from more cost-effective and localized publishing and distribution options, exile media now depend on cloud-based systems, secure communication platforms, and digital publishing tools to sustain editorial workflows and audience engagement.

Technology has also played a critical role in helping exile media circumvent censorship and repression. Tools such as satellite television and encrypted messaging platforms (e.g., Signal, WhatsApp, Telegram) allow media organizations to bypass government controls and maintain secure communication with both staff and audiences.

Infrastructure challenges are shared across both contexts, including frequent electricity shortages that necessitate the use of power storage systems and solar power to sustain operations inside the country. Despite these constraints, exile media in both contexts continue to leverage technological solutions to enhance newsroom operations, coordinate across dispersed teams, and navigate complex political and geographic barriers.

Both Myanmar and Afghanistan have experienced politically motivated internet shutdowns, which pose severe challenges to media operations, especially for outlets working in exile with in-country contributors. In response, media organizations in Myanmar have adapted a range of strategies to maintain connectivity and continue publishing. These include the use of satellite internet systems to bypass government-controlled networks, roaming SIM cards, and foreign SIM cards for cross-border mobile data access. These adaptive practices reflect the resilience and innovation of exile media in navigating digital repression and sustaining independent journalism under authoritarian constraints.

Early experimentation with artificial intelligence reflects a cautious yet forward-looking approach among exile media organizations, with an emphasis on human oversight to preserve editorial integrity. More broadly, efforts to adopt and integrate technological tools are often constrained by capacity gaps among staff. These include varying levels of technical literacy, limited digital security awareness, and the need for continuous training to fully utilize available platforms and tools. These challenges underscore the importance of investment in capacity building to ensure that technological solutions can be effectively adopted and scaled across diverse exile media contexts.

3.4.1 Secure communication and infrastructure limitations

Secure communication platforms are essential for exile media to operate, publish, and maintain contact with both audiences and field staff. Additionally, both countries face the impact of government repression on technology, including internet shutdowns and restrictions that hinder connectivity and access.

Both countries' media organizations are not only working in exile, but also often have editorial team members based in multiple locations *(see 3.5.1)*. The newsrooms rely on secure email servers to coordinate across dispersed teams. In addition, the exile newsrooms are in constant contact with their audience, who would often use applications and platforms with which they are familiar, but which might not necessarily be secure. While secure platforms are used internally, the need to connect with audiences often leads to engagement on more familiar but less secure public platforms like Facebook, Messenger, and Viber, depending on regional preferences. While this constitutes a security risk, media managers pointed out that they cannot change the engagement habits of their audience, who communicate with media houses through applications with which they (the audience) are familiar and comfortable.

Internet connectivity is a persistent issue for the media outlets. In Myanmar, especially in conflict zones, internet connectivity is often interrupted, deliberately throttled or cut by the authorities. As the resistance to the government persists and expands, the issues of connectivity outside of Yangon, the country's main city, continue. To counter this, outlets have adapted by using global commercial satellite systems to bypass government-controlled networks. At the time of this report being researched (September 2025), the Afghan government cut the fiberoptic internet connections to a number of provinces and then instituted a total internet shutdown nationally, although internet connectivity has since been restored.

Myanmar has experienced long-term internet shutdowns, notably in Rakhine State, even prior to the 2021 coup *(see 3.1.5)* and intensified disruptions following the 2021 military coup. These included nationwide blackouts, targeted mobile and Wi-Fi outages, and region-specific shutdowns in areas and territories controlled by resistance movements. As resistance movements have gained ground, areas under their control have also faced deliberate internet restrictions imposed by the military regime in the central part of Myanmar and border areas. In response, civilians and media outlets adopted various strategies to bypass restrictions. Where available, fiberoptic connections were used. In more severe cases, roaming SIM cards, enabled mobile data access beyond border areas, despite challenges. Some outlets briefly used SMS to deliver breaking news, despite significant security risks. To maintain information flow under surveillance, audiences relied on alternative platforms, word-of-mouth and mobile networks. Currently, some media organizations distribute printed news bulletins in internally displaced persons' (IDP) camps affected by area-specific shutdowns, continue to use one-time-use SIM cards and foreign SIMs in border regions and are using satellite internet. These adaptive practices reflect the resilience of media in navigating digital repression and sustaining independent news circulation.

> ***We use satellite technologies in many areas of the country to support our operations and stay connected. We also provide essential training to our teams so they can either deliver further training or pass on this knowledge to others, including our audience. This is how we try to use technology and innovative methods to ensure that we remain in touch with our audience and that our audience stays connected with our media's information and content.*** (Myanmar)

An innovation pioneered by television in exile media has seen successful call-in programs, which attract both diaspora and home country callers. The anonymity of the callers is critical in these instances.

3.4.2 Technological tools and innovation

While both contexts share a commitment to secure infrastructure, the degree and direction of technological innovation vary. The priority is operational security under conditions of surveillance and repression. Myanmar and Afghanistan's exile media are applying cloud-based systems for internal workflows. They track audience analytics through digital tools, supported by dedicated digital and IT staff. However, innovation tends to be centered around strengthening secure infrastructure.

Both countries focus on utilizing secure platforms for communication and training, and the demands and risks of running media operations with reporting staff based in-country, means that newsrooms couple technological tools along with operational safety procedures that rely on identity masking and layers of anonymity.

Selected media houses from both countries are actively experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) tools to support translation and newsroom tasks, including generation of graphics. The media organizations report their early experiments with integrating AI tools into the newsroom production process, and they emphasize the importance of human guidance, intervention and oversight in finalizing any AI-generated outputs. Although limitations persist for the languages employed by the exile media houses, there is growing interest in custom AI integrations with the media houses' archives to strengthen fact-checking and investigative reporting. This reflects a forward-looking approach to leveraging emerging technologies for editorial integrity and efficiency.

3.4.3 Capacity and adoption challenges

The level of tech familiarity among staff varies across media houses and media organizations have identified a pressing need for capacity building in technical skills, and effective use of emerging technologies such as AI. This uneven adoption underscores the need for tailored capacity-building efforts that reflect the diverse operational realities within the exile media landscape.

Some Myanmar outlets report restricted platform usage due to limited technical capacity, while others have established dedicated digital and IT teams that support cloud-based systems and audience analytics. In both countries, technological innovation and impact is constrained by limited access to resources.

What factors have led to resilience and success as regards technology?

Adaptation to infrastructure challenges: Exile media have demonstrated resilience to address the infrastructure limitations through the use of global satellite systems, cloud-based systems, and power storage systems which enable them to maintain operations under electricity and internet constraints.

Secure communication culture: The widespread adoption of encrypted communication platforms such as Signal, WhatsApp, and Telegram has allowed media organizations to protect staff and audience interactions.

Creative use of AI: Both countries have demonstrated innovation, with the use of AI tools for translation and newsrooms tasks including generating graphics and experimentation for investigative support.

Audience-centric platform choices: By balancing the use of secure tools with audience-preferred platforms like Messenger and Viber, exile media have managed to maintain reach and engagement while mitigating digital risks, showcasing both their responsiveness to audience needs and their ability to operate securely under pressure.

Capacity awareness: The recognition of internal capacity gaps in digital security and tech literacy has enabled media organizations to prioritize capacity development as a prerequisite for sustainable tech adoption.

3.5 Safety and security

Safety and security are not just operational concerns for exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar; they are existential. Journalists face threats to their lives, families, mental health, and digital identities. These threats are compounded by authoritarian regimes, legal invisibility, and limited support systems. Media organizations have developed sophisticated strategies to mitigate risks, but challenges persist across physical, digital, and psychosocial domains.

Physical threats are a daily reality for exile journalists who work in-country in both Afghanistan and Myanmar. The editors and staff of exile media outlets often have to consider safety and security as important as a daily operational factor as the stories that the newsrooms are working on. Journalists face surveillance, arrest, and violence, often compounded by risks to their families and communities.

For journalists in exile, transnational repression is a lived reality: the threats to people close to them back home remain persistent, and respondents have also mentioned receiving threats even while in exile.

In addition, journalists and media organizations face pervasive legal threats both in their home countries and in exile. In their countries of origin, independent journalism is criminalized, licenses are revoked, and journalists are routinely subjected to arrest, torture, and long-term imprisonment. Many of the exile journalists relocated to neighboring or regional countries, often themselves societies that are struggling with issues of repression and surveillance around their domestic media. Legal registration as media is often not possible, and many outlets operate under alternative legal identities or without any journalist's registration at all. Afghan media outlets have managed to register in some Western countries, gaining access to legal protections, but this remains the exception.

Exile journalists from Afghanistan and Myanmar face persistent legal vulnerabilities in neighboring host countries. Exile organizations at times operate as alternative legal identities such as NGOs, educational entities, or other forms of companies or without any registration at all. Journalists in exile themselves face visa-related vulnerabilities. Many rely on a variety of legal documents, but these documents do not legally permit media work, and renewal processes are expensive and risky. Afghan refugee and migrant populations have faced mass expulsions recently from both Pakistan and Iran and their continued stay in regional countries is not guaranteed. Afghan journalists face potential deportation during visa extensions, while Myanmar journalists struggle with legal invisibility and financial insecurity in the countries that they have fled to, including neighboring countries. Journalists themselves rely on a variety of visas in order to stay in their country of exile. These documents do not legally authorize media work, leaving journalists vulnerable to legal penalties, harassment, or deportation.

Passport renewal is another critical vulnerability, often triggering exposure to hostile authorities or denial of services.

3.5.1 Physical safety: Navigating threats on the ground

Exile media organizations operate under persistent physical threats in both Afghanistan and Myanmar. Several journalists have been detained and tortured for their reporting, with some facing long-term imprisonment. Arrest does not necessarily mean being charged with an offense. The common practice of arresting journalists and holding them in detention before eventual release is in itself a constant threat. Independent journalism is considered illegal, and collaboration with exile media is criminalized. This extends to journalists who had worked with the media in the past, including staff members who worked with media organizations when they were working in-country, prior to the 2021 political changeovers. The threats to journalists working in-country are common to both locations, with a few country-specific differences. This section outlines the key risks and the protective measures adopted by media organizations in each country.

Threats to families are particularly pervasive in Afghanistan. Women journalists in Afghanistan face uniquely severe and layered threats under Taliban rule. Beyond the general criminalization of independent journalism, there are severe restrictions on women working or often being able to leave their homes without facing harassment. Women working as reporters often have to do so secretly, and they are targeted not only for their professional roles but also for defying gender norms and enforced gender persecution in Afghanistan's public sphere. For female journalists, the risk is compounded as Taliban threats extend to their male relatives, who are held to be custodians of women in their family. Families may face retaliation if women are found to be working in the media.

In Myanmar, long-term imprisonment is a particular threat, and in some cases, the authorities have occasionally imposed a life sentence on journalists. Citizen journalists working in areas controlled by ethnic armed groups face airstrikes, heavy weapons fire, and intimidation. Journalists also face criticism and pressure from factions within their own community, including personal attacks on social media.

In order to mitigate the security risks, the media organizations have adopted several measures:

Anonymity protocols: Afghan exile organizations work with strict anonymity protocols. Staff identities are concealed even within the organization. Usernames are coded, and colleagues do not know each other's real names to prevent mass arrests. In Myanmar newsrooms, journalists, particularly in sensitive areas, are anonymous and identities concealed from colleagues. *(See 3.4.1)*

Safety guidelines and protocols: Media outlets have formal safety policies and protocols that include risk level assessments and response protocols tailored to local

dynamics. Staff temporarily leave messaging groups before entering high-risk zones and reconnect only when safe. Staff are instructed not to carry office-issued devices outside their homes to avoid confiscation or inspection and to maintain separate mobile phones for personal and professional use to reduce the risk of surveillance and tracking.

Protocols around contacting sources and regime spokespeople: The newsrooms are very careful about contacting sources. For Myanmar media organizations, usually only staff based abroad are allowed to contact sources directly. In Afghanistan, all communication with Taliban authorities is handled by staff based abroad. *(See 3.2.3)*

SIM card rotation: In Myanmar, journalists use multiple SIM cards not registered under their names and remove them immediately after use to avoid tracking. Afghan media organizations have issued staff with international SIM cards in order to register for messaging apps, so that they do not access the apps and platforms through local networks.

Relocation schemes: Emergency relocation is an important safety measure for staff working in both countries. When necessary, editors move staff and citizen journalists from high-risk provinces to safer areas or to neighboring countries, often with emergency budgets allocated for rapid relocation. However, the compounded nature of gender-based threats means that women journalists often face greater barriers to safety, mobility, and mental well-being.

Rotational salary collection: In Afghanistan, staff nominate proxies to collect salaries, avoiding routine patterns that could be tracked or intercepted.

3.5.2 Digital safety: Securing communication and content

Digital safety is a critical concern for both Afghan and Myanmar exile media organizations. Journalists face surveillance, censorship, and cyberattacks. The following outlines the key digital risks and the protective measures adopted by media outlets in each country.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have blocked access to independent media websites, forcing exile outlets to shift to alternative platforms and rely heavily on social media to reach audiences. In Myanmar, media outlets face daily Distributed Denial-of-Service (DDoS) and brute force attacks, often linked to state or foreign actors. These attacks aim to disrupt newsroom operations and limit public access to information.

Journalists in both countries face constant risk of exposure surveillance through digital footprints such as messaging platforms, device data and online activity. This exposure could lead to serious consequences, as working for exile media is criminalized, creating an atmosphere of pervasive fear and vulnerability for reporters and in-country media personnel.

> ***"No one inside the country knows each other. Nobody. For example, if one person is arrested, authorities have no way of identifying their colleagues who are still inside the country. Even I don't know all of our colleagues who are still there. Direct communication with them is impossible; only a small, trusted group can reach out. For instance, one journalist living inside the country is in contact with a few editors abroad, but it's strictly one-to-one communication.*** (Afghanistan)

Cybersecurity risks such as hacking, interception, and unauthorized access to media communications remain high. The Myanmar military regime has demonstrated significant capabilities in recovering deleted data from confiscated devices, leading to arrests even when journalists have taken precautions.

The use of common messaging apps such as Signal, Telegram, Viber and Messengers carries risks, especially in conflict zones. Phones are searched at roadblocks and during detentions, exposing journalists and their sources.

In order to mitigate against these digital threats, exile media houses in Myanmar and Afghanistan have adopted the following measures:

VPN use and logout protocols: Staff are required to use VPNs at all times to mask their online activity and to log out of all platforms when not actively working, minimizing traceable digital footprints.

Secure internal platforms: Media outlets have developed custom portals for content sharing that are designed to leave no traceable metadata on devices, enhancing internal security.

Digital safety training: Manuals and training sessions are provided, often led by experts with cybersecurity expertise. All staff receive training in secure communication practices and device hygiene.

Dedicated digital focal staff: Some media organizations have established in-house digital teams or focal staff responsible for monitoring systems, defending against cyberattacks, and maintaining secure infrastructure.

Multi-platform communication: Despite risks, journalists continue to use multiple platforms to reach audiences and sources, adapting their communication strategies based on accessibility and safety.

3.5.3 Psychosocial and trauma-related support

The psychosocial dimension of exile journalism is often under-recognized, yet it is central to the resilience and sustainability of media organizations operating under threat. In both Afghanistan and Myanmar, journalists are aware of the emotional toll of their work. Constant exposure to tragic and violent content resulting in vicarious/secondary trauma, emotional strain from trauma, isolation, the pressure of working in secrecy, financial insecurity, and the burden of supporting detained colleagues and their families contribute to a complex landscape of trauma. Despite limited access to formal mental health services, journalists in both countries have adopted practical, human-centered coping mechanisms. Most notably, peer support has emerged as the most effective and trusted form of psychosocial care. It reflects the principles of trauma-informed journalism, grounded in empathy, solidarity, and shared purpose.

Afghan journalists face deep trauma rooted in decades of war, exposure to conflict and violence, and the loss of colleagues. Cultural stigma around mental health remains strong, with therapy often viewed as a sign of weakness or instability. In this context, peer support is not just a substitute for formal care; it is the backbone of emotional resilience. Supervisors and colleagues offer informal check-ins, flexibility, and encouragement. Occasional leave and quiet conversations provide space for recovery, even if not structured.

Journalists also draw strength from the impact of their work. Producing content that informs and empowers Afghan audiences provides a sense of purpose and emotional reward. For women journalists, the psychosocial burden is even greater. Many operate in isolation, without safe spaces or community support, while facing threats to themselves and their families.

> ***We still have staff who are actively working. But, from time to time, when we notice someone struggling or unable to continue, we send them on leave—sometimes for a month, sometimes for 15 days. We just tell them to sign out and take time for themselves. It's partly for their well-being. Sometimes, we know it's necessary.***
> (Afghanistan)

Journalists in Myanmar face an intense emotional burden as they navigate a landscape marked by violence, censorship, and fear. The psychological toll is compounded by constant exposure to traumatic content, tight deadlines, and the ever-present threat of arrest or retaliation. The detention of colleagues and the suffering of their families add layers of guilt, grief, and moral responsibility that are difficult to process.

In this context, peer support has become a critical coping mechanism. Journalists lean on one another for encouragement, ethical reflection, and motivation. This collective resilience helps sustain morale and reinforces a shared sense of purpose, especially in the absence of formal institutional support.

Since the 2021 Myanmar military coup, there has been a growing recognition of mental health needs. Some organizations have responded by offering counseling services and psychological assistance. However, the impact of these services is often limited by ongoing instability and the cyclical nature of trauma. Journalists report that while counseling can be helpful, it does not fully address the reality of their lived experiences.

Many continue working, driven by a deep sense of duty and the trust placed in them by their communities. This commitment, while admirable, often comes at the cost of personal wellbeing. Crucially, journalists emphasize that resilience support alone is not enough. Healing trauma must be accompanied by practical support systems that reflect the real-world challenges they face.

The following outlines the key psychosocial risks and the support mechanisms in place or needed.

Journalists carry unprocessed trauma, stemming from decades of war, repeated exposure to violence, and the loss of colleagues. In both Afghan and Myanmar contexts, cultural stigma surrounding mental health presents a significant barrier to care. Therapy is frequently viewed as a sign of weakness or mental instability, discouraging journalists from seeking the help they need and reinforcing silence around psychological distress.

The limited support available is mostly informal, consisting of occasional time off, peer-to-peer conversations, or self-managed coping mechanisms within newsrooms. Structured psychosocial services are rare, and when present, often lack the depth and relevance needed to address the unique pressures faced by journalists in exile, leaving a gap in effective, context-sensitive care.

Journalists are also regularly exposed to vicarious/secondary trauma, as they report on disturbing events, images and stories under tight deadlines, without emotional buffers, leading to cumulative psychological strain.

Financial insecurity is a persistent source of stress for journalists in exile. Funding cuts and legal restrictions in host countries contribute to chronic stress and uncertainty, compounding the emotional toll of exile and professional risk.

Journalists also bear the responsibility for detained colleagues, often using personal funds to support imprisoned colleagues and their families, adding emotional and financial strain to their already vulnerable circumstances. While some emergency support systems exist, they are often limited, typically offering only one-time assistance, even for those imprisoned. This leaves media workers without sustained support, especially when they are no longer actively working due to detention.

The hardship faced by families of detained journalists is profound. When a journalist is arrested, entire households are often destabilized, particularly when the journalist is the primary breadwinner. The impact extends beyond the individual, affecting the emotional and economic well-being of loved ones left behind.

Editors and newsroom managers have responded to the sustained trauma that media workers are exposed to. This includes journalists in exile, who are impacted by events that have happened to them, the threats to their families back home and also their daily exposure to vetting images and covering stories.

Measures and adaptations

Peer support and informal care: Senior staff within exile newsrooms offer flexibility and emotional support to their teams, often through informal check-ins, conversations and offering leave time. While these practices are not structured, they reflect that mental health is increasingly recognized as a legitimate concern.

Employment as a buffer: Many media workers find emotional strength in the impact of their work, which helps sustain morale. Having meaningful work is seen as a stabilizing factor, contributing positively to mental health and wellbeing.

External referrals: In some cases, journalists are connected to external organizations for professional counseling services.

Peer support and ethical reflection: Newsroom teams share positive feedback and stories of impact, fostering a sense of solidarity and maintaining morale.

Access to counseling: Some staff have begun accessing external counseling services.

What factors have led to resilience and success as regards safety and security?

Exile media organizations in Afghanistan and Myanmar have demonstrated exceptional resilience in the face of systemic repression, violence, and digital surveillance. Their ability to adapt and sustain operations under such conditions is rooted in several key strategies and strengths.

Safety strategies: Physical and digital safety are intertwined. Journalists face threats both on the ground and online, requiring integrated protection protocols. To mitigate these risks, journalists operate under strict anonymity protocols, with in-country staff often concealing their identities even from colleagues. Additionally, operations spread across borders. Senior editorial and operational roles based abroad manage sensitive communications, ensuring operational continuity while minimizing exposure.

Organizational adaptability: Exile media houses rely on emergency relocation schemes and contingency planning to protect staff and sustain operations. These plans include emergency budgets, rotational salary collection and editorial decentralization (e.g., editors abroad

handling sensitive communications). Both Afghan and Myanmar media outlets have developed internal safety policies or guidelines and appointed a dedicated digital focal person or teams in some media outlets to manage digital risk.

Gender-sensitive approaches: Exile media organizations have demonstrated resilience by recognizing and responding to the gender-specific threats faced by female journalists, especially in Afghanistan, where threats extend to family members and societal norms restrict mobility.

Technological adaptation: Use of VPNs, secure portals, and SIM card rotation are critical digital safety measures. Some organizations have developed protocols, guidelines or custom platforms to avoid traceable data and digital exposure.

Capacity building: Continuous digital safety training, internal safety policy development and implementations, often led by experts, strengthens institutional resilience.

Despite immense emotional strain, exile media organizations have cultivated resilience through community, purpose, and adaptive care strategies.

Peer support as a core resilience mechanism: Informal, trust-based emotional support is the backbone of psychosocial resilience in exile media. Peer networks foster solidarity, ethical reflection, and emotional strengths, helping journalists cope with trauma and maintain morale.

Journalism with meaning: The emotional reward of informing and empowering communities sustains morale. Many journalists derive strength from the trust placed in them by their audiences and the visible impact of their reporting, which reinforces their commitment.

Cultural sensitivity and adaptations: Resilience strategies must be culturally appropriate. In contexts where therapy is stigmatized, organizations have adapted by embedding care into daily routines and leadership practices. While occasional access to external counseling is helpful, peer support remains the most trusted and accessible form of psychosocial care.

4. Overall key findings on resilience and success factors for exile media

4.1 Resilience factors

In this study, resilience refers to the institutional and structural strength that enables media organizations to withstand threats, adapt to changing environments, and maintain long-term sustainability. The overall resilience factors for exile media that this study found are laid out below:

Audience

Adaptation to high-risk environments: Both Afghan and Myanmar media use encrypted and anonymous communication channels, and journalist intermediaries to protect audience identities. Myanmar media also engage audiences through field-based reporting, and community networks, despite surveillance.

Maintaining in-country presence while in exile: Both Afghan and Myanmar media sustain significant in-country reporting footprints through citizen journalists and contributors, despite the restriction of operating from exile.

Strategic use of multi-platform distribution: Satellite TV, radio, and digital platforms are used not just for reach, but to evade censorship, maintain visibility, and respond during national crises.

Embedding audience feedback into editorial workflows: Feedback mechanisms are securely and systematically integrated into editorial planning, enhancing relevance and accountability.

Building trust under pressure: Afghanistan and Myanmar exile media have demonstrated that trust can be built even in times of repression, displacement, and crisis. By staying connected to local voices, responding to audience needs, and upholding journalistic integrity, both longstanding and newly established outlets have earned credibility and maintained engagement, despite operating in hostile environments.

Sustaining trust over time: Myanmar media further illustrate resilience through long-term audience loyalty, built over decades of consistent, independent reporting. Even when editorial views differ from public opinion, this enduring trust reflects deep institutional strength and effectiveness of long-term engagement strategies.

Sustaining news gathering under extreme constraints: Rapid deployment of citizen journalism networks and contributors ensure real-time coverage despite repression and logistical barriers.

Content

Editorial independence and ethical journalism in exile: Operating outside authoritarian control has allowed Afghan and Myanmar media to uphold democratic values and journalistic integrity, even while under pressure from regimes and criticism from some opposition groups.

Content diversification and format adaptability: Media outlets have strategically expanded their editorial scope beyond political reporting, adopting formats to fill information voids and reach diverse audiences.

Audience-centric planning: Editorial strategies are shaped by feedback mechanisms and audience needs, thereby ensuring responsiveness to the evolving expectations of audiences.

Rigorous verification systems: Multi-layered fact-checking processes, combining local reporting with editorial oversight outside the country, help ensure credibility and counter misinformation in politically hostile environments.

Hybrid operational models: Flexible structures and transnational reporting networks allow exile media to maintain continuity despite displacement and censorship.

Strategic collaboration and solidarity: Informal and institutional networks provide support, resource-sharing, and operational backup, reinforcing resilience in hostile environments.

Contingency planning and mutual aid: Lean organizational structures and embedded crisis strategies help longstanding and experienced exile media outlets withstand shocks and adapt to changing conditions.

Revenue and business models

Adaptation to infrastructure barriers: Organizations have developed workarounds such as foreign bank accounts and third-party platforms to bypass surveillance and restricted domestic banking systems.

Donor support as a lifeline: Despite its fragility and short-term nature, donor funding remains the backbone of operational survival. Exile has meant the loss of access to local media markets and business opportunities. The cut in US foreign funding has had a significant and sustained impact on exile media operations.

Technology

Adaptation to infrastructure challenges: Organizations have pointed to the use of global commercial satellite services for internet shutdown areas. They have also implemented secure internal communication systems and alternative power sources to maintain operations amid electricity shortages and internet restrictions and shutdowns.

Mitigating against factors that limit audience engagement: Technology and technological platforms have enabled media organizations to circumvent factors that limit audience engagement, such as low literacy levels. The availability of digital platforms has expanded the range of storytelling techniques and platforms, enabling the audience with low or limited literacy rates to engage audio-visual content.

Being able to replicate home country publishing presence: Media organizations that were printed publications while in-country can move to digital platforms and continue publishing and engaging their audience when moving to exile. This ensures continued presence and visibility.

Safety and security

Safety systems: Physical and digital safety are treated as interconnected domains in the newsrooms. The news operations rely on anonymity, especially for in-country staff. Having the senior operational capacity functioning from abroad helps protect staff and operations.

Organizational adaptability: Exile media houses rely on emergency relocation schemes for at-risk staff. This is supplemented with rigorous contingency planning, including around banking and salary transfers to in-country staff.

Technological adaptation: Newsrooms as well as their reporters in the field consistently use VPNs, secure portals, SIM card rotation, and custom platforms to avoid traceable data. Where feasible, newsrooms employ dedicated digital teams to manage cybersecurity risks.

Peer-based psychosocial support: In the absence of formalized, long-term psychosocial programs, exile journalists rely on informal, trust-based emotional support, in order to foster individual resilience. Peer networks within the newsroom and the exile media fraternity offer opportunities for solidarity, reflection, and emotional support.

4.2 Success factors

In this study, success refers to measurable indicators of operational viability and public impact. The overall success factors for exile media that this study found are summarized below:

Audience

Having an established identity, structure and audience prior to exile: Media organizations that had professional, visible, audience-engaged operations prior to exile were able to replicate some of these factors in exile, giving them a stronger base from which to build, rather than start from zero. Having already established in-country meant that they had a ready audience who could engage with them immediately, even if the organization switched platforms from being a printed domestic newspaper, to being published online or switching to more digital and audio-visual content. Established Myanmar organizations had operated in exile previously and were able to re-activate structures and call on their previous experience for their second exile.

Strategic rebuilding: Experienced Myanmar media outlets' focus on consolidation over expansion supports organizational stability.

Credibility and consistency of outputs: The news organizations' ability to consistently produce independent coverage from within their home countries builds trust, drives audience growth, and sustains retention.

Establishing benchmarks for media independence: Both Myanmar and Afghanistan's exile media are setting the benchmarks for media independence inside their own country contexts. The Afghan media do this by providing counter-narratives and covering topics and groups that the regime do not want covered. The experience of multiple exiles by Myanmar's media established the benchmarks for independent media standards through their decades of consistent credible, independent coverage. When there was a political changeover and they were allowed to return home, those standards continued and took root in-country, thereby overshadowing the propaganda of media organizations aligned to the regime.

Sustained audience reliance as a measure of impact: Continued reliance on Myanmar exile media highlights a key success factor, the cumulative impact of long-term existence and audience engagement. This signals operational viability and public relevance, showing that success is not only about reach but also about the depth of audience relationships built over time.

Continued visibility despite exile: Media outlets report that they have managed to maintain a strong presence in their home country through their consistent coverage. This has been enabled by having a large contributor footprint, who work anonymously but provide regular reporting from within the respective countries.

Content

Sustained audience engagement: Both Afghanistan and Myanmar's exile media aim to maintain strong engagement with their audiences, and report that they are achieving this despite having limited resources. The audience's engagement is tracked through consistent data collection and review.

Tangible humanitarian and policy outcomes: The exile media have a close relationship with their audience, who often see them as more than news providers. The media organizations are embedded in the communities that they serve, and this has led to humanitarian responses to audience members in need and the facilitation of public debates through the media house forums.

International recognition: Exile media report that their coverage has had far-reaching impact and has been referenced by global institutions. This includes the United Nations, international investigative mechanisms and the US State Department, thereby validating the credibility and influence of exile media.

Revenue and business models

Revenue diversification: Exile media are engaging multiple avenues in order to diversify income. This includes digital platform-based monetization, memberships and subscription models, generating income through partnerships to produce work for organizations as well as providing a service for hire.

Digital platform-based monetization: Being exiled has often meant that media organizations have lost their ability to have a print platform and they have turned to digital platforms to air their content. Platforms like YouTube and Facebook offer a ready audience and are often popularly accessed within their home countries. At the same time, restrictions around monetization and the impact of content moderation policies from technology giants, have impacted growth.

Technology

Creative use of AI: Exile media are investigating the creative ways in which artificial intelligence (AI) tools can support newsroom operations. This includes using AI (with human oversight) for graphics generation, translation and the establishment of searchable news archives.

Incremental innovation: Technology has been used by exile media to fulfil a range of supportive roles, including tracking and analyzing audience analytics, employing digital tools for content production and using technology as a key part of safety protocols. Where feasible, some newsrooms employ onsite dedicated IT teams, who also deal with any cyberattacks that exile media are subjected to.

Safety and security

Safeguarding operational continuity: Media outlets continue producing content despite surveillance, censorship and physical danger. The operational continuity is often the public face of the media organizations and this is sustained by discreet, anonymous teams of in-country reporters and corresponding secure workflows. Success is maintained through creative adaptations in staffing, communication, and infrastructure.

Audience trust: The media houses and its individual journalists derive recognition, strength and professional support through the trust placed in them by their communities. Exile media say that their audiences rely on the content that they produce and the exile media often fulfil the role of a national media, despite danger, threats, censorship and technological restrictions.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for exile media

Audience

- **Avoiding rapid expansion without safeguards:** Refrain from expanding programs, structures, or staffing beyond their capacity unless supported by a clear contingency plan and budget. Growth without crisis preparedness can expose organizations to operational risks and compromise sustainability. Strategic rebuilding, lean structures, and flexible planning are more effective in volatile environments.
- **Strengthening inclusion:** Continue efforts to recruit, train, and retain women and marginalized groups, and ensure their perspectives are reflected in content and leadership.
- **Leveraging strategic networks:** Deepen collaborations with peer organizations and international platforms to amplify reach, share resources, and build collective strength.
- **Secure feedback infrastructure:** Invest in encrypted communication tools and anonymous feedback channels to protect audience identities and strengthen editorial responsiveness.
- **Platform diversification:** Diversify distribution platforms to mitigate censorship and algorithmic suppression, ensuring consistent access and visibility across digital environments.
- **Citizen journalism network strengthening:** Strengthen citizen journalism networks by providing training, operational support, and safety protocols to enable reliable in-country reporting.
- **Participatory journalism and civic engagement expansion:** Foster participatory journalism models that build trust and deepen audience engagement through inclusive storytelling and community involvement and expand civic engagement initiatives such as media literacy programs and community seminars to empower audiences and promote democratic participation.
- **Trust-building as long-term strategy:** Treat audience trust as a long-term investment by prioritizing consistent, credible reporting and sustained community relationships over short-term metrics.

Content

- **Verification systems strengthening:** Continue investing in multi-layered verification systems, fact-checking programs, ethical editorial practices to maintain credibility and counter misinformation.
- **Strategic content diversification:** Expand editorial coverage to include topics that foster engagement across diverse communities, addressing both immediate needs and long-term interests.
- **Audience engagement deepening:** Use structured feedback mechanisms such as surveys and social media analytics to inform content strategy and drive format innovation.
- **Holistic impact tracking:** Track influence and impact using both quantitative metrics (e.g., reach, engagement) and qualitative indicators (e.g., policy impact, humanitarian response, public discourses) and develop internal systems to monitor both dimensions.
- **Content format balancing:** Diversify content formats to include both in-depth analysis and accessible storytelling such as short videos and podcasts, to reach varied audience segments.

Revenue and business models

- **Revenue streams diversification:** Expand beyond donor dependency by investing in alternative revenue generation strategies, including monetization on digital platforms, partnerships with NGOs, diaspora networks, and host communities.
- **Engagement with technology companies:** Engagement with technology giants around community standards enforcement for media companies reporting from countries experiencing conflict and also monetization disparities based on geographic location are key gaps in building exile media sustainability. The exile media and the donor and support organizations that work with them will help sustain the industry by opening channels of engagement with the large technology companies.
- **Business capacity investment:** Seek tailored business development support and participate in peer learning exchanges to strengthen strategic planning and financial sustainability.

Technology

- **Secure infrastructure strengthening:** Continue investing in encrypted tools, cloud-based systems, and secure digital infrastructure to protect sensitive communications and ensure operational continuity.
- **Emerging technology piloting:** Explore the use of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies and tailor local languages, editorial workflows, and contextual needs.
- **Internal capacity development:** Prioritize staff training in platform use, digital tools, and technology literacy to build in-house expertise and reduce reliance on external support.

Safety and security

- **Integrated safety protocol development:** Develop and regularly update physical and digital safety policies that reflect local dynamics, assign dedicated safety focal points for both in-country and host country teams, and establish contingency plans for emergency scenarios.
- **Anonymity:** Implement coded identities, pseudonyms, and compartmentalized communication structures to protect staff, while decentralizing editorial and operational functions to ensure sensitive tasks are managed securely by diaspora-based personnel.
- **Gender-sensitive safety system:** Create safe mobility pathways and emergency relocation plans specifically for women journalists and establish confidential support channels to address gender-based threats.
- **Secure technological infrastructure investment:** Adopt secure communication platforms, custom content-sharing portals, and internal systems that minimize metadata exposure, while implementing organization-wide practices such as SIM card rotation, device separation, and VPN usage.
- **Digital safety capacity building:** Conduct regular digital safety training sessions led by internal or external experts to ensure staff are equipped to manage evolving cyber threats.
- **Peer support:** Train supervisors and senior staff in trauma-informed leadership, and create supportive environments for self-reflection, storytelling, and informal check-ins, including flexible work arrangements to support mental wellbeing.
- **Flexible workplace establishment:** Embed flexibility and recovery time into newsroom workflows by offering additional leave options and non-performance-based support to address the psychological toll of journalism in exile.
- **Networking with other exile media:** Engage with other exile media networks, correspondents' clubs and media in host countries to reduce professional isolation and foster connections between exile media and local media communities in host countries.
- **Support for women journalists:** Develop safe spaces and gender-sensitive psychosocial support systems, including confidential support channels and peer networks tailored to the needs of women journalists.
- **Integrated psychosocial and survival support:** Ensure that psychosocial care strategies incorporate employment stability, financial assistance, and family support, recognizing the interdependence of mental health and survival.

5.2 Recommendations for media development organizations

Audience

- **Cross-exile conversations and collaborations:** Foster cross-exile dialogue and collaboration by supporting community-building programs and advocacy initiatives. International solidarity has played a vital role in sustaining exile media. Donors and media organizations should proactively foster cross-exile exchange and advocacy initiatives.
- **Cross-border knowledge exchange:** Facilitate opportunities for exile media to share strategies, experiences, and innovations across borders to strengthen audience engagement and operational resilience.

- **Technical support for platform diversification:** Offer technical assistance to help exile media diversify distribution platforms and improve audience analytics, enabling broader reach and data-informed editorial planning.
- **Media literacy and civic education:** Promote media literacy and civic education initiatives in displaced and marginalized communities to build informed audiences and strengthen democratic participation.
- **Policy advocacy for media worker protections:** Advocate for legal and policy frameworks that safeguard the rights and safety of media workers and citizen journalists in both home and host countries.
- **Support for long-term audience engagement:** Invest in initiatives that reinforce editorial consistency and community trust-building, recognizing that audience loyalty in exile media is often built over decades of credible reporting, not just short-term metrics.

Content

- **Strategic partnership facilitation:** Connect exile media with NGOs, INGOs, and IGOs to expand their reach, amplify their impact, and integrate their reporting into broader advocacy and humanitarian efforts.
- **Support for audience-centric models:** Promote the use of tools and methodologies that help exile media align content with audience motivations, needs, and preferences to enhance relevance and engagement.
- **Peer learning platforms:** Create and support platforms for cross-border peer learning focused on editorial strategies, impact measurement, and resilience-building practices in exile.
- **Journalism capacity building:** Provide sustained support for tailored journalism training and production, especially in under-reported and challenging contexts, to ensure continued coverage and professional development.
- **Strategic collaboration:** Support partnerships between exile media and regional or international outlets or networks to enhance visibility, content sharing, and operational support.
- **Impact measurement:** Support the development and implementation of tools and frameworks that enable exile media to assess and communicate their influence effectively to stakeholders and audiences.

Revenue and business models

- **Tailored business support:** Deliver context-specific business development guidance tailored to the unique challenges of newly formed exile media outlets, moving beyond generic training models.
- **Regional collaboration support:** Facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges, expert consultations, and joint planning initiatives among exile media communities to foster shared learning and strategic cooperation.
- **Infrastructure workarounds assistance:** Help media outlets access secure financial tools and intermediaries that enable them to bypass surveillance and restrictions in both home and host countries.
- **Technology platform advocacy:** Collaborate with technology companies to reform monetization policies and reduce algorithmic penalization of conflict-related content, ensuring fair access and visibility for exile media.

Technology

- **Tailored capacity building:** Design capacity-building programs that reflect the diverse needs, operational contexts, and varying levels of technological familiarity across exile media organizations.
- **Localized digital toolkits:** Provide secure communication and newsroom management tools that are adapted to specific local contexts and operational risks.
- **Technology trend monitoring:** Track emerging technological threats and opportunities to proactively support media partners with timely tools, training, and strategic guidance.

Safety and security

- **Safety policy development:** Provide technical assistance to help exile media draft and implement context-specific safety policies through experts with local knowledge.
- **Gender-inclusive safety programming:** Fund initiatives that address mobility, mental health, and operational barriers for women journalists and support gender-sensitive safety protocols with exile media partners.
- **Technological adaptation for security:** Offer grants or in-kind support for secure platforms, cybersecurity tools, and digital infrastructure, while also facilitating access to expert networks for risk assessments and platform development.
- **Peer networking for safety:** Build trust among exile media partners by supporting regional safety hubs and peer networks that enable the sharing of best practices and collective problem-solving.
- **Create supportive environments for journalists experiencing trauma:** Equip journalists with tools to process trauma through programs that integrate peer support, self-care practices, and ethical storytelling approaches.
- **Hybrid mental health models:** Bridge formal counseling services with informal, peer-led support by funding community-based or in-house mental health initiatives tailored to the realities of exile.
- **Gender-inclusive mental health programming:** Co-design psychosocial support systems with women journalists to ensure that programs address gendered trauma, mobility restrictions, and threats to family safety.
- **Integrated psychosocial and economic support:** Support initiatives that combine employment stability, legal protection, and emotional care, recognizing the interconnected nature of mental health and economic survival.

5.3 Recommendations for donors

Strategic programming and donor influence: There is an opportunity for donors to use their institutional power to shape programming that strengthens the resilience of exile media operations.

Audience

- **Multi-platform distribution infrastructure:** Invest in satellite, radio, and digital infrastructure to help exile media reach audiences across censored and low-connectivity environments, enhancing visibility and resilience.
- **Training and safety mechanisms for citizen journalists:** Provide resources for training and protection of citizen journalists who operate in-country under high-risk conditions, ensuring safe and ethical reporting.
- **Flexible funding to allow adaptation during crises:** Offer funding models that allow media organizations to quickly adapt to crises, including political upheaval, internet shutdowns, and security threats.
- **Collaboration between exile media and civil society:** Support initiatives that foster partnerships between exile media and civil society groups, strengthening community ties and expanding audience engagement.

Content

- **Editorial autonomy:** Continue providing funding without editorial interference to preserve journalistic independence and credibility.
- **Long-term sustainability:** Move beyond short-term project funding to support core operations and strategic growth, ensuring continuity and institutional strength.
- **Donor demands for innovation, financial sustainability against operational realities:** Avoid placing unrealistic demands for innovation or financial self-sufficiency on exile media, recognizing the constraints they face and the risks of overburdening fragile operations.

Revenue and business models

- **Core funding:** Shift from short-term, project-based grants to multi-year funding that enables strategic planning and reduces burnout.
- **Approaches to funding:** Design funding mechanisms that include core and programmatic support, budget flexibility for unplanned costs (e.g., security, visas), contingency and seed funding for diaspora-focused initiatives and revenue generation. This mechanism should also reflect the operational realities of exile media, including security risks, legal constraints, and the need for agility.
- **Coordination:** Improve coordination among donors to ensure funding continuity, reduce duplication, and maintain transparency and responsiveness.
- **Revenue innovation:** Fund experimentation with alternative business models, digital monetization strategies, and audience engagement tools to help exile media diversify income sources.

Technology

- **Infrastructure support:** Support access to alternatives to current domestic internet connections, including commercial satellite connections, cloud services and backup power systems.
- **Technological innovation support:** Invest in the development and use of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital tools that enhance editorial quality and improve operational efficiency.
- **Technology adoption:** Ensure capacity-building components in technology-related funding to ensure scalable and long-term integration of digital tools and systems.
- **Digital safety enhancement:** Strengthen digital security infrastructure by funding initiatives that protect media workers and audiences from surveillance, cyber threats, and data breaches.
- **Radio platform development:** Support the development of radio programming as a low-tech alternative for reaching remote audiences by funding access to transmitters and shortwave radio technology, which has become increasingly scarce. Some media outlets have started considering radio programming, but efforts have been hampered by not being able to access transmitters; the unavailability of shortwave radio receivers and technology that previously allowed for shortwave broadcasts, having been severely reduced.

Safety and security

- **Flexible emergency funding:** Design adaptable funding mechanisms that allow for rapid relocation, emergency budgeting, and contingency planning. Ensure funding can be used for non-traditional safety needs, such as anonymity protocols or secure salary or expense collection systems.
- **Gender-responsive safety funding:** Allocate dedicated resources specifically for women journalists' safety, including relocation, emergency support, safe spaces, mental health, digital protection and mitigation strategies.
- **Capacity building for safety and resilience:** Fund ongoing physical and digital safety capacity building, policy development and updates, and organizational resilience planning. Support knowledge transfer and technical mentorship programs based on ever changing environments. Provide resources for cross-border coordination and secure communication systems.
- **Peer-led mental health initiatives:** Support culturally appropriate, community-based and in-house care models including trauma-informed leadership development within exile media organizations.
- **Survival-oriented mental health initiatives:** Fund mental health initiatives that integrate employment stability, family support, and emotional care, using flexible funding mechanisms to meet the survival needs of media workers.
- **Long-Term wellbeing strategies:** Invest in sustainable mental health systems that move beyond short-term trauma responses and promote long-term wellbeing for exile media professionals.

This study underscored the resilience and adaptability of exile media in Afghanistan and Myanmar and shows how they do their best to practice independent journalism even under authoritarian oppression. Through strategic audience engagement, tailored content, revenue models as diversified as possible, and robust technological and security infrastructures, the exile media outlets studied are committed to continuing to serve their communities with credibility and relevance. The findings offer actionable insights for media development actors, funders, and exile media outlets, emphasizing the need for sustained support, flexible funding, and trauma-informed practices. Given the global decline in press freedom, the experiences of Afghan and Myanmar exile media offer a deeper understanding of strategies for protecting independent journalism in exile.

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