

# THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

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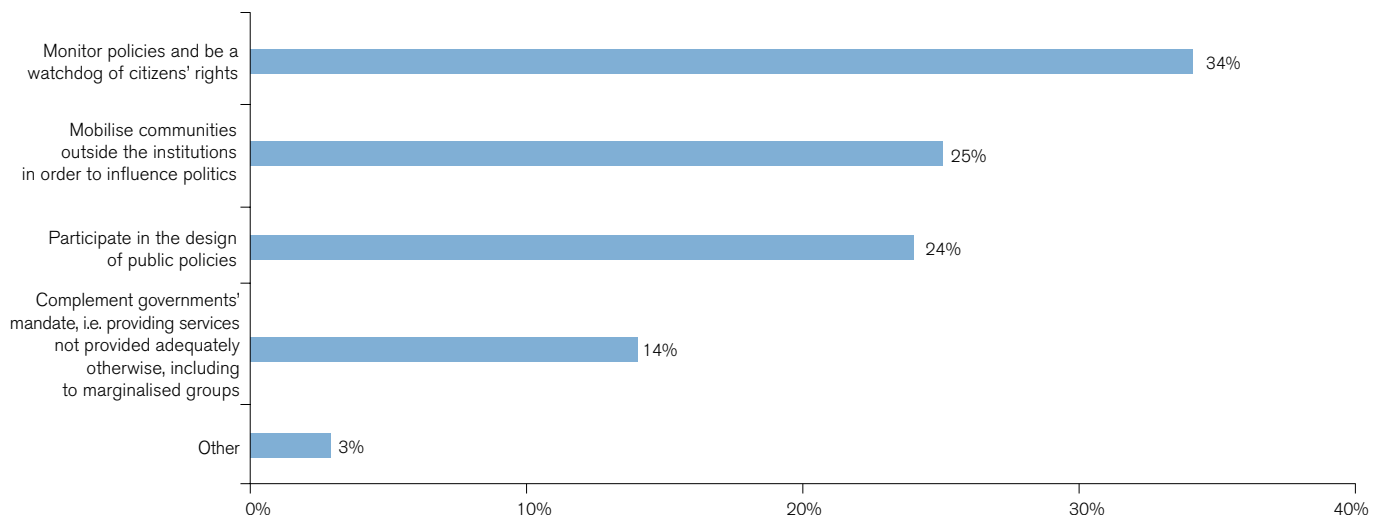
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## Introduction

The media, be it considered part of civil society or not, plays a vital role in holding authorities to account, exposing corruption, providing information to citizens, offering a platform for debate, and shaping opinions. As such, it is well placed to “monitor policies and be a watchdog of citizens’ rights”, which was considered by the respondents to this Survey as the most important mission of civil society.

**Graph 1: What should be the most important mission of civil society?**

(respondents were asked to choose 2 options out of 4)



Source: Compiled by the IEMed based on the results of the 10th Euromed Survey

These functions mean that independent media outlets are a particular target for authoritarian regimes and for other individuals in society with vested interests. In addition, in our “post-truth era”, where societies are manipulated by all kinds of propaganda and disinformation, many people are attracted by what is easy and familiar. This has meant a drive towards simple identities, polarised audiences and more and more echo-chambers, where individuals’ beliefs and “truths” are constantly reiterated to them in both the on and offline media.

In such a moment of disorientation, trust is becoming more important than the truth. Trust is a very important conservative value – it makes people believe each other – but when it surpasses truth, then democracy is in crisis.

That is why EED is investing in objective, independent, attractive and trusted media.

In the light of the Survey's results, this article presents EED's work in the area of independent media and reflects on lessons learned in media and democracy support. It offers an analysis of the worrying trends and challenges faced by the media today and calls for an urgent re-set in thinking about donor support to the media in the EU neighbourhood. The article also seeks to offer some recommendations.

## EED's Media Support

Over the past six years, EED has funded more than 230 media-based projects, 45 of them in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Most EED-supported media initiatives fall into one of two categories: small, start-up initiatives that operate more like NGOs and larger, professional media outlets.

The smaller initiatives often experiment with innovative ideas, reaching specific segments of society and contributing to media plurality.

Professional independent media outlets (or entities that aspire to this status) are often working in environments with no independent public broadcasters and they face uphill struggles to survive. Core operating costs are significant; quality journalism, especially investigative journalism, is a resource-intensive and long-term activity. Such media outlets require skilled employees and expensive technical equipment and are in direct competition with private or state-owned media. Typically, they have business models that involve subscriptions and/or advertising revenue but, for reasons as outlined below, will frequently be heavily reliant on donor support.

EED's media work can broadly be divided into the following five thematic areas: ensuring media pluralism, supporting innovation, countering disinformation, investigative journalism and documentation, and media targeting specific audiences.

In addition, EED supports journalist associations, media capacity-building initiatives and efforts to support media legislation reform and to provide legal aid to journalists.

## Trends and Challenges

In its World Press Freedom Index 2019, Reporters without Borders notes a deterioration in conditions for the media in many countries of the EU neighbourhood with increasing persecution of government critics and authoritarian control over news and information. This corroborates the finding of the Survey that the major obstacle for civil society as a whole in Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries is "political pressure on civil society activists."

These findings are backed up by the experience of EED partners, who report back to EED regularly on the challenges they face in their daily work. In the most restrictive environments, independent media outlets are banned, denied licences and harassed through denial of premises, raids on their offices, arrest and legal charges against journalists. Attacks and intimidation of journalists is common, often with apparent impunity, and self-censorship is often necessary for these media outlets to survive. In such contexts, independent media outlets have sometimes responded by moving their operations to portals managed from abroad or by using encrypted private platforms to disseminate content. While online platforms offer them a lifeline, they also come with their own challenges. In financial terms, the dominant online platforms such as Google, YouTube and Yandex siphon off a large share of potential advertising revenue from them, making financial self-sustainability all but impossible. There is also the relatively expensive cost of using Facebook or Twitter advertising, which is often

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the most effective way of building audiences for online media. Another increasing trend is the use of state-sponsored disinformation and trolling to target critical online media. False accusations and complaints about supposed breaches of the platforms' service conditions are organised to provoke take downs. Dominant online platforms such as YouTube continue to lack transparency and there is an absence of an efficient appeals process to deal with this growing phenomenon.

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One of the major challenges for all independent media is financial survival. While it is clear that digitalisation has disrupted traditional business models, there are also other factors at play. Governments often deliberately create conditions to starve media of revenue as a way of asserting governmental control and forcing independent media out of business. The media operates in a competitive environment but in many countries, even in relatively open environments, media markets are distorted. Media outlets or platforms are often owned or financed by oligarchs, political figures or state actors that heavily subsidise the media in order to project a particular political viewpoint or narrative, thereby eliminating fair competition. In some countries, advertising cartels under political control have emerged that effectively cut independent or opposition media out of the media advertising market. Countries with small populations face additional challenges to deliberate market distortions due to the small size of the markets in which they operate. While pluralism exists, media outlets compete for shrinking resources and a limited audience, and this can lead to poor quality or politicised journalism resulting in public distrust of the media.

### Ensuring Media Pluralism

A vibrant independent media is an integral feature of any democratic society. An independent media shines a light on the conduct of governments, holds authorities to account, and provides a diversity of opinions that enable people to make informed choices during elections. It is important to ensure that a plurality of voices is maintained and that reliable information is available, especially in fragile environments. Threats to media pluralism include government restrictions on independent media, deliberate distortion of media markets through political or oligarchic control of media outlets or the advertising markets they depend on, and self-censorship from independent media due to political contexts. An increasing threat also comes from media funded by single international sources with heavy political agendas. Independent media outlets serve as an important counterweight to such politicised media.

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### Supporting Innovative and Creative Media

New technologies such as social media, podcasting and private messaging channels provide opportunities for alternative media and are particularly important for media operating in restrictive environments. Often such informal types of media have come to the fore during times of political change, where the fast pace of events means that citizen journalists can emerge as the best sources for accurate, real-time reporting. The rise in internet connectivity is also changing the way people consume media. Young people increasingly consume media on mobile phones and through social networks, where algorithms can filter out or promote certain content. Social networking platforms can provide both opportunities for independent media and challenges as they adapt to a rapidly changing and largely unregulated space, and compete for attention with disinformation and clickbait. EED also supports media initiatives that use creative and artistic approaches to communicate with the public about political or social issues, using satirical cartoons, documentary photography or film.

## Countering Disinformation

Disinformation – the deliberate spreading of false information intended to mislead – is a growing global problem. Although not a new phenomenon (states of all stripes have engaged in manipulation of the media, especially in the build-up to and during conflict), the ease and speed with which disinformation can now spread online via social media as well as the increasing sophistication of disinformation tactics has brought renewed focus to the issue. Disinformation can polarise societies and aggravate divisions and contribute to an overall distrust of the media. This makes support to truly independent media more vital than ever. EED research has found that this is often best done by concentrating on producing locally focused content, which is usually absent from the more geopolitically-focused disinformation. Quality content that is more relevant to people's everyday lives can help attract audiences away from sources of disinformation. Other relevant actions include supporting fact-checking initiatives and efforts to increase critical thinking and media literacy.

## Investigative Journalism and Documentation

Media initiatives that document human rights violations or expose corruption make an important contribution to democratic progress, yet they are among the highest risk activities for journalists. Investigative journalism is also increasingly under threat because of the cost and time involved in pursuing stories. With many media outlets struggling to make ends meet, it is often impossible to concentrate resources on a single story, and there are also the political and personal risks to both media outlets and journalists who expose malpractice. In conflict areas, human rights violations often go unreported or are misreported by the claims and counterclaims of parties to the conflict. Journalists who try to shine a light on the facts become targets themselves, as has tragically been seen all too often in Syria. Documenting the truth about abuses of human rights during conflict is also a way of preparing for future peace and reconciliation processes. Supporting the media in these contexts can therefore be seen as an investment in future peace and democracy processes.

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## Media Targeting Specific Audiences

As part of its efforts to support inclusive democracies, EED assists media initiatives that target specific populations such as ethnic or linguistic minorities, women and youths. Many such audiences are neglected by existing media, and supporting targeted media outlets is a way of promoting the democratic participation of these communities. Such outlets frequently require donor support for their core operations as they often target smaller and excluded audiences.

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## Examples from the MENA Region

- **Daraj** is an ambitious online media platform based in Lebanon that brings together smaller independent media outlets and professional freelance journalists from across the MENA region to produce high-quality and in-depth reporting. Set up by three experienced Lebanese journalists who wanted to provide an alternative to the politicised and polarised Arabic media on offer, Daraj currently boasts some 200 contributors, many of whom write under pennames for their own safety. Launched in late 2017, EED seed funding has enabled Daraj to build its brand and reputation. In its first 18 months, Daraj has already made its mark. An early success was its partnership with leading global media as part of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists that released the so-called “Paradise Papers”, which exposed the hidden offshore wealth of the global elite. In another high-profile report, in December 2018, Daraj exposed how a loans programme run by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was

being used to support members of pro-regime militias in Syria. The story led to the freezing of the programme and an internal UN investigation. According to CEO Alia Ibrahim, there is a real appetite for investigative reporting in the Arab world, with several long-form reports featuring in Daraj's ten most-read items. As well as investigations, Daraj publishes opinion pieces, features on social issues, and is experimenting with formats such as video explainers on current affairs. Daraj is based on a hybrid business model that combines donor funding with a long-term ambition for self-sustainability. Its growing readership proves there is a real demand for independent media in the Arab world. But, as Ibrahim stresses, there is a need for continued support: "We need to be able to work strategically with a clear vision – for this we need long-term funding. We need to build the culture and to work with a true sense of partnership with our funders and other collaborators."

- EED has supported the **Al-Jumhuriya Collective**, which was set up in 2012 by a group of pro-democracy writers and intellectuals to bear witness to the events of the conflict in Syria and to provide an independent Syrian analysis of what was happening on the ground in the country and in society.
- EED supported the online version of the Berlin-based **Saiedet Souria** magazine aimed at women in Syria and promoting women's rights and their participation in the public sphere. EED also provided bridge funding to help the magazine continue during a period of fluctuating donor support.
- Working mainly on a volunteer basis and writing anonymously, the Lebanese collective of young journalists **Megaphone** uses social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook to distribute tailored content targeted at youth audiences. "We noticed that mainstream media didn't speak our language, that our narratives remained untold," says Jamal, one of the co-founders of the Lebanese collective Megaphone. Using video explainers and bite-sized news reporting that appeal to tech-savvy youth audiences, they aim to provide alternatives in content as well as in form. For example, during the much-postponed legislative elections in 2018 – Lebanon's first under a new proportional system – Megaphone provided information to help voters understand the new system as well as interviews with candidates who were excluded from the mainstream channels. In addition to writing for youth, Megaphone covers issues related to groups whose voices are marginalised by the politicised and sectarian Lebanese media establishment, such as refugees, Palestinian refugees, women and migrant workers. "We have an agenda," they admit. "Our agenda is about promoting equality of rights, social justice, and civil liberties for both citizens and non-citizens in Lebanon, and holding the establishment to account." As Megaphone tries to build on its successes to date, its biggest obstacle is funding. The young volunteers already come with a high level of technical expertise but, as Jamal acknowledges, they are competing with the big pockets of state media giants – a story that will be familiar to many of their counterparts in other countries.
- **Sowt**, a regional media group based in Jordan, was started in 2017 and produces high-quality podcasts on regional topics, such as the 1967 War, use of religion by the state, the Syrian revolution, and women artists. Taboo issues such as single parents and abortion, etc., are also covered, partly because the audio format allows anonymity, yet intimacy. Their objectives are to be independent, innovative and optimistic.

## Policy Recommendations

Based on its own experiences and feedback from partners, EED drew up the following lessons learned as a contribution to the policy discussion and as good practices for other donors interested in supporting independent media in the EU neighbourhood:

1. Scale up support for independent media initiatives in recognition of their vital role and the costly nature of their work. A key aspect of this is taking a longer-term approach to media support, focused on core funding rather than project-based funding.
2. Be realistic about self-sustainability. Support the development of hybrid business models to increase and diversify revenue of media outlets while recognising the probable ongoing need for donor support. Support for media should be considered as a direct investment in democratic progress, not simply as a business investment.
3. Greater donor coherence, coordination and consistency. EED is able to act fast to provide seed funding, emergency support or bridge funding for media. To complement this, new modalities and funding mechanisms for professional media may be needed to fill the gap in funding for the mid- to longer-term support. Combined efforts and coordination between donors are needed to provide adequate funding and synergy of approach. Tailored indicators and evaluation mechanisms should be developed recognising the link between funds, results and impact.
4. See media as equal partners. In much of the EU neighbourhood, journalists and media professionals have a high level of skills and experience. Too often support is donor-driven rather than demand-driven, directing efforts into training that is not appropriate or needed or donor-preferred types of content production that may be simpler to monitor and/or come with fewer risks.
5. Be more political. Media support, especially in more restrictive environments, is a political rather than a technical activity. Donors should consider supporting overtly opposition media outlets where they demonstrate democratic values.
6. Ensure visible international political and diplomatic support to journalists and media outlets. This has been shown in many instances to offer a form of protection, protecting the wellbeing and life of journalists. The EU should exercise its political leverage to push for a more open media environment. At the same time, it should be recognised that donor support should not always be visible and some partners may not wish to communicate about their funding sources to the general public.
7. Keep the security dimension in mind when working with independent media. It is important to ensure a plurality of voices and that reliable information is available, especially in fragile environments. This is particularly important when independent media outlets compete with others that are receiving significant funding from single international sources with heavy political agendas, for example Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran.
8. Focus on local content. Local content that is relevant to people's daily lives is often lacking. This can help build trust in the media and counter disinformation.

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## Conclusions

Despite the authoritarian backlash that has gripped the region and stifled almost all of the revolutionary movements, there is new energy in Arab media that has increased over time. People wish to define themselves and reflect on topics and problems in the modern Arab world, be it faith, identity, conservative society or terrorism. In the MENA region, journalism is much more than just reporting; it also means creating a sense of collective memory, especially during times of conflict. Independent Arab media can help both the EU and the youth of the region understand what is happening in their world, and empower them to be agents of positive change.