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Study

Incentives for Media Startups in Lebanon amid the Turmoil: Challenges and Opportunities

Dr. Maria Bou Zeid



INCENTIVES
STRATEGY

This publication is within the project entitled "Media Reform to Enhance Freedom of Expression in Lebanon", implemented by Maharat Foundation, Legal Agenda and the European Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) with the support of the Delegation of the European Union to Lebanon. The project aims at enhancing Freedom of Expression in Lebanon through the promotion of media law reform as a priority on the national agenda and improvement of the environment for media coverage on the transparency and accountability of elections process.

The project supports the publication of background papers produced by Maharat Foundation on the local Lebanese context and by MJRC on the European standards and best fit recommendations for Lebanon. The papers cover 6 main themes: Protection of journalists and their sources, Associations of journalists, Decriminalization, Incentives, Innovation, and Regulation, co-regulation and self-regulation opportunities for the media.



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This study was prepared within the project to reform media and promote freedom of expression in Lebanon:

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Media and Journalism Research Center (MJRC) MJRC:

[MJRC](#) is an independent media research and policy think tank that seeks to improve the quality of media policymaking and the state of independent media and journalism through research, knowledge sharing and financial support. The center's main areas of research are regulation and policy, media ownership and funding, and the links between tech companies, politics and journalism.

Maharat Foundation:

[Maharat Foundation](#) is a women-led freedom of expression organization based in Beirut dedicated to campaigns grounded in research and strengthening connections between journalists, academics, and policy makers.

It advances and enables freedom of expression, quality information debate and advocates for information integrity online and offline. Maharat promotes innovation and engages the journalistic community and change agents within Lebanon and the wider, MENA region to promote inclusive narratives and debates and to counter misinformation, disinformation, and harmful content.

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1 .EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper delves into the legal, structural, and financial challenges faced by media startups in Lebanon, with a particular focus on the main factors affecting the emergence of a healthy media startup sector in the country. It provides an analysis of the consequences of these challenges on independent media and proposes potential measures to foster a more dynamic innovation scene. By abolishing restrictive regulations and providing incentives, Lebanon can create an enabling environment for startups to thrive and contribute to a diverse and vibrant media landscape. It is worth noting that till the time of this study's release, a significant void exists in Lebanon's legal framework concerning media enterprises that have embraced digital communication technologies via the internet to engage with their audience.

The primary key message stemming from this study underscores the need to adopt a progressive media law and to establish constructive incentives that foster the sustainability of media startups. This entails measures such as exemptions from taxes, the streamlining of administrative processes, and the mitigation of disruptions caused by strikes within public administrations. Additionally, there's a call to bolster the efficacy of incubators, accelerators, and investment funds, with a specific emphasis on enhancing media-focused programs within these entities.

2 .INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In the context of the fourth industrial revolution, the mere discussion of the term "digital" itself can be considered outdated. This era represents a seismic shift in the technological landscape, where advancements are occurring at an unprecedented pace and in a profoundly interconnected manner. As we stand on the brink of this new age, innovation and entrepreneurship are crucial for driving growth and dynamism in Lebanon. Nonetheless, startups at large, and particularly those in the media domain, confront an array of obstacles that impede their progress. This paper thoroughly examines the repercussions stemming from these challenges on the evolution of a resilient media startup landscape (digital and post-digital), while also proposing strategies to nurture a more dynamic atmosphere conducive to creativity and innovation within the country.

3 .METHODS

To comprehensively tackle the subject matter, this study employed a multifaceted data gathering process. The initial phase involved meticulous desk research, establishing a robust foundation for the topic under examination. This review encompassed an exhaustive analysis of various papers, articles and reports revolving around the topic under-study.

This was followed by semi-structured interviews. This qualitative approach was selected to gain profound insights from individuals with substantial experience about the theme.

3 .METHODS

The selection of interviewees utilized purposive sampling, identifying experts based on their contributions to the legal and innovation fields. Employing open-ended questions, the interviews focused on discussing perceived legal and infrastructure obstacles to innovation. These interviews took place both in person and online, facilitating detailed discussions and real-world examples. They were then transcribed verbatim enabling subsequent thematic analysis, uncovering patterns, recurring themes, and crucial insights pertaining to Lebanon's innovation challenges.

The interviewees included legal professionals, such as Lawyers Tony Mikhael, Dany Samaha, and Victoria Cherfane, who provided insights into complex legal matters related to startup operations in Lebanon. Additionally, media experts were interviewed to explore practical dimensions, featuring Alia Ibrahim (co-founder and CEO of Daraj Media), Krystal Khalil (programs director at Berytech Incubator), Wael Akiki (program Manager at Samir Kassir Foundation) and Hassan Youness (sustainability expert and strategist).

This methodology is designed to provide the necessary framework for addressing the following research questions:

Where does Lebanon stand in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its implications on digital media?

What incentives can be offered to startups in the media sector to ensure sustainability and growth?

How does this impact what is currently known as the alternative or independent media sector?

4 .TRENDS IN MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

In terms of media trends, today's users are looking to fulfil both their cognitive and entertainment needs as they increasingly turn to online streaming and diverse forms of entertainment, all the while with video content taking centre stage (Berytechbeat, 2020).

The younger cohorts, including Gen Zs and Millennials, engage in video games and consume user-generated content (UGC) not only for entertainment but also to establish social bonds and experience a profound sense of immersion—a feeling of profound engagement that can even transport them into the digital realm. Conversely, Gen X and the older generations are still more TV oriented (Deloitte Insights, 2023).

Speaking of news consumption, social media is opening new horizons for new and counter narratives resulting in the solid founding of independent media as a serious alternative for their mainstream counterparts.

Moving to Lebanon, it is important to shed lights on some demographic data that can clarify important points revolving around consumption habits since this will impact the recommendations provided as the main outcome of this research. At the commencement of 2023, Lebanon boasted 4.70 million internet users, reflecting an internet penetration rate of 86.6 percent. As of January 2023, the social media user count in Lebanon reached 4.91 million individuals, accounting for 90.5 percent of the overall population. During the early months of 2023, the active cellular mobile connections in Lebanon numbered 4.69 million, constituting 86.4 percent of the total population (Kemp, 2023). These figures underscore the significant potential that this sector holds for the country in terms of both business and innovation.

5 .OVERVIEW OF THE MEDIA STARTUPS SCENE

In today's post information societies, new business models emerged opening the door for a fresh trend in media entrepreneurship and the establishment of media startups that hinge on innovative and creative approaches to content presentation. In Lebanon, the digital revolution has mainly contributed to providing content that is regarded as independent (Maharat, 2020), thereby challenging the domination of mainstream media mostly controlled and owned by political factions.

However, the surge in the media entrepreneurship landscape came to a halt due to the multiple crises that afflicted the country as of 2019 spanning from the pandemic to the Beirut Port blast and the unprecedented financial crisis. The latter has added an additional layer of difficulties to the already existing ones such as limited access to technical talent, political instability, and the market's limited scale (Maharat, 2020).

6 .THE CHALLENGES

“The central challenge within the media entrepreneurial ecosystem at present lies within the mindset and expectations of media graduates themselves. Many of them continue to seek conventional employment rather than exploring entrepreneurial opportunities. This tendency can be traced back to the historical high capital requirements and subsequent entry barriers that prevailed in the media industry in the past. Additionally, a lack of business background and know-how required to initiate their own ventures has contributed to this inclination.” (H. Youness, personal communication, August 28, 2023).

Besides this, media startups encounter challenges similar to those faced by startups in general, and many entrepreneurs lack essential guidance in business planning and networking, revealing gaps in the local innovation ecosystem.

- **Marketing Hardships**

The predominant challenges, on the marketing level, lie in ensuring financial stability, expanding into foreign customer markets while retaining local ones, prioritizing marketing and business growth at the expense of a robust legal and administrative foundation, and contending with the persistent fluctuations in political and economic landscapes (V. Cherfane, personal communication, August 3, 2023).

In the realm of media startups in Lebanon, a pivotal obstacle centres around the lack of profitability within the Lebanese market (Maharat, 2020). This notion aligns seamlessly with the case of Daraj which is a platform forged by seasoned journalists to provide Arabic-speaking audiences with a distinct brand of independent journalism (Daraj, 2023). Their viability study illuminated a crucial insight: restricting the target audience solely to Lebanon would be limiting. Recognizing the potential in catering to the diaspora emerged as a key strategy for ensuring sustainability. Moreover, the considerable underservice of the Arabic language further amplifies this potential, sparking a sense of optimism (A. Ibrahim, personal communication, August 7, 2023).

6 .THE CHALLENGES

Viability within a small market is also a main struggle. In this context, an exemplary initiative has been undertaken by the Samir Kassir Foundation. They established an advertising agency named "Agency for Equality" aimed at bolstering emerging media ventures by generating advertising revenues. Functioning as a nonprofit agency, its primary goal is to sustain independent media outlets by furnishing them with essential advertising services (W. Akiki, personal communication, August 25, 2023).

- **Infrastructure Hurdles**

The weak internet infrastructure poses a considerable obstacle, hampering efficient operations and hindering technological advancements. This connectivity issue limits the ability of startups to leverage digital platforms and tools effectively (Maharat, 2020). Moreover, the administrative routines in the country are further complicated by frequent strikes in public administrations. Such disruptions interrupt essential processes, causing delays in paperwork, licenses, and approvals required for business operations.

The hurdles on the infrastructure level require constant adaptation to ever-changing conditions. Managing the logistics, encompassing everything from rent and electricity to generators, demands a consistent allocation of both human and financial resources to formulate primary plans as well as contingency measures. As an example, in the wake of the collapse of Lebanon's social security entity, considerable efforts were directed towards formulating contingency plans in collaboration with private insurance companies (Ibrahim, 2023).

- **Financial Barriers**

On August 22nd, 2013, Circular 331 was issued by the Banque du Liban (BDL), infusing \$400 million into the Lebanese business landscape. Subsequently, in 2016, the cap was elevated to \$650 million, aiming to intensify innovation and incentivize banks to increase their investments. This circular was aimed to ensure that 75 percent of banks' ventures in the knowledge economy are secured, either through direct equity investments in startups or by means of backing from startup support entities (Freifer, 2018).

6 .THE CHALLENGES

The implementation of this decree was marred by significant flaws. In this context, a 2016 report by the World Bank on the ecosystem of emerging technology companies documented that many entrepreneurs in the study sample believed that the 331 might have favoured financial institutions over startups (Al-Ameen, 2021).

One of the key findings in the report is that the major challenge facing Lebanese startups is securing financing without participating in business accelerator programs. According to the same report, these accelerators do not significantly impact the quality of the benefiting startups compared to those that do not participate in such programs. It has become evident that business accelerators, in general, do not provide high-quality training to entrepreneurs to assist them in ensuring sustainability (World Bank, 2017).

Irrespective of the ongoing debate that surrounded its implementation, the circular yielded a favourable influence on the startup scene back then. The 331 Circular effectively bolstered the ecosystem until the onset of the financial crisis in 2019 (Ajjan, 2022).

As of 2019, the collapse of the banking sector and the devaluation of the Lebanese currency have led to a de facto suspension of the circular. This paper will investigate how this deadlock has had detrimental effects on the innovation scene in Lebanon providing recommendations for enhancing innovation in the current challenging situation.

- **Legal Challenges**

The process of launching a company in Lebanon involves several procedural steps that used to be simple prior to the crisis that hit the country in 2019. Firstly, the company must be registered within the commercial register of the specific geographical area. Depending on the nature of the company, registration is carried out either in the general commercial register or the specialized commercial register. This registration number essentially serves as the company's identity and is mandatory to feature on all official documents and memoranda related to the company (D. Samaha, personal communication, August 2, 2023).

6 .THE CHALLENGES

Furthermore, each company is required to possess bylaws that are duly signed, either before a notary public or the head of the commercial register within the relevant operational area. Notably, as highlighted by Samaha, the challenge in Lebanon lies not in initiating a company, but rather in its eventual dissolution.

Delving more into the legal details and conforming to Lebanese regulations, the country's most prevalent legal forms for companies include:

- Sole Proprietorship
- Limited Liability Company (LLC or SARL in French)
- Joint Stock Company (JSC or SAL in French)
- Holding Companies
- Offshore Companies

As a general norm, the expenses associated with establishing and running a Joint Stock Company (JSC) typically exceed those of a Limited Liability Company (LLC). However, JSC presents several advantages over LLC. The most noteworthy among these are the freedom to transfer shares, a reduced threshold for capital increase and the attraction of new investors, as well as exemption from stamp duties and taxes related to share transfers (Berytechbeat, 2019). A good amendment that was introduced in 2019 is an SARL with sole partner. It's important to note that, in this context, the guidelines of the Central Bank of Lebanon stipulate that companies must operate as Joint-Stock Companies (JSC) in order to qualify for financial support (Michael, 2023)

According to Cherfane, 2023, in line with the procedures, each company is required to set up a bank account, a process that has grown increasingly complex due to the prevailing banking and financial challenges within the country.

6 .THE CHALLENGES

She added that often, young entrepreneurs lack clarity on the optimal company structure for their ventures, with the distinction between shares and parts, for instance, carrying personal liability implications. In the case of an LLC, the concept of "parts" applies, while a JSC involves "shares."

Presently, many commercial registers are either closed or functioning with limited capacity, rendering simple administrative tasks nearly impossible. The primary obstacle at present is the start of a new account, as banks exclusively accept applications for fresh US dollar accounts.

During the initial stages of the crisis, the possibility of opening a bank account as part of the company establishment process seemed implausible. Nevertheless, a significant development occurred with the introduction of what is now referred to as "fresh accounts". Numerous legal professionals who work closely with startups have successfully negotiated an arrangement with banks. This arrangement entails the opening of a Lebanese pounds' account, which is subsequently closed immediately after the completion of the company formation procedures, while simultaneously initiating a fresh account. Remarkably, this singular step currently demands approximately two months for completion. Not to forget the impact of the strike at public institutions among which the commercial register and its implications on the length of the whole process (Cherfane, 2023).

On the positive side, the depreciation of the local currency has significantly reduced the initial capital necessary to initiate a business. For instance, the previously required amount for a JSC stood at 30 million Lebanese Pounds, equivalent to 20,000 USD, and 5 million for an LLC. This latter point, according to Cherfane, presents a positive aspect amidst the gloomy picture, as it eases the financial load on individuals possessing innovative ideas who aspire to bring them to execution. Cherfane also emphasized the constructive role of the pandemic-induced lockdown, which provided numerous individuals with the opportunity to reevaluate their life decisions and shift their professional trajectories toward entrepreneurship.

Digging deeper into the legal framework, a significant legal shift occurred with the enactment of the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law No. 81 on October 10, 2018, which will be further explored in the upcoming sections of the paper.

7 .THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEDIA STARTUPS

Transitioning to startups within the media sector, the procedural steps for establishing the company are similar to those previously outlined. However, the commercial activity differs. For instance, Daraj is registered as a content creation company hence its primary commercial undertaking revolves around content production (Ibrahim, 2023).

The absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework for digital media is leading numerous initiatives to register as Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) instead of for-profit companies. An additional track within this category is the civic companies that are non-profit in essence (Akiki, 2023) and are exempt from taxes since they do not make profits.

These CSOs operate under the governance of the 1901 law, necessitating the acquisition of an informative document from the Ministry of Interior—a process that can sometimes span up to six months. Consequently, in terms of formation, establishing a company proves to be a simpler route. But in practice, while the process of forming companies may be more straightforward compared to that of CSO's, the corresponding obligations towards the state at large and especially the Ministry of Finance are notably easier for organizations. It is important to mention that certain outlets do operate solely online, primarily on social media platforms, without formal registration. This absence of legal recognition hinders these initiatives from accessing funding opportunities and more. Nonetheless, it's important to note that this situation falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Addressing the divergence between the for-profit versus non-profit trajectories and its implications for the culture of innovation in Lebanon, Ibrahim (2023), explained the pivotal rationales underpinning Daraj's deliberate choice to embrace the path of a for-profit entity instead of opting for the non-profit status. Ibrahim underscored that while any accrued profits are reinvested into the company, the concept of generating profits holds significant weight in ensuring media autonomy. Despite encountering challenges within the grant ecosystem due to this stance, Ibrahim highlighted a transformative shift catalysed by transparent dialogues with donors who traditionally didn't allocate grants to for-profit enterprises.

7 .THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR MEDIA STARTUPS

The process of establishing the company, according to Ibrahim, was simple. The most time-intensive phase encompassed ideation to ascertain the optimal structural framework. This was followed by crafting a robust strategic document coupled with an exhaustive market analysis and viability study. Speaking to the viability factor, Ibrahim affirmed that Daraj predominantly relies on grants, accounting for around 70% of its financial support. The remaining 30% emanates from internally generated revenue streams. These involve income derived from training initiatives and commercial production services extended to external entities, as well as in-house production collaborations with akin stakeholders in the ecosystem. The significance of diversifying the portfolio emerges as a fundamental driver behind Daraj's accomplishments, a facet warranting deeper exploration in the forthcoming recommendations section. The profit margin garnered through commercial productions plays a pivotal role in bolstering the company's expansion, given the limitations of innovative latitude within grant funding.

8 .ONLINE PLATFORMS AMIDST DIGITAL LAW ABSENCE

As alluded to earlier, the absence of a modern media law is creating a significant level of uncertainty surrounding the appropriate legal framework for online platforms in Lebanon. While matters concerning content are overseen by the 1962 Publications Law, it can be generally stated that commercial endeavours are under the Commerce Code guided by the intent for consistent profit (T. Michael, personal communication, July 31, 2023). For instance, a news website or a social media page engaged in the regular sale of advertising space falls within the purview of the Commerce Code (Samaha, 2023). The issue of online content will be further explored in the next section.

8 .ONLINE PLATFORMS AMIDST DIGITAL LAW ABSENCE

The Commerce Code's stance on digital media platform activities and their classification as commercial endeavours is contingent on specific criteria. Primarily, media work itself is not inherently deemed a business, unless it exhibits additional defining traits. Unlike commercial enterprises that involve the buying, selling, or leasing of tangible goods to generate profits, media work operates on a distinct foundation (Michael, 2023).

While media activities do not align with the conventional commerce model, the Commerce Code introduces a nuanced perspective. It recognizes certain undertakings conducted within projects as commercial activities. This includes publishing, printing commitments, or public viewing initiatives. These commercial projects can either be individual enterprises or collective efforts formed by a group of individuals, facilitated through legal structures such as companies.

Article 31 of the Publications Law further elucidates the criteria for political publications. It stipulates that licenses for such publications are exclusively granted to journalists or press companies, reinforcing the specific qualifications required within the realm of media-related activities.

The realm of publication projects and printing commitments encompasses institutions that bridge the gap between authors and the public. A comprehensive understanding of such projects necessitates an inclusive perspective, embracing diverse mediums such as books, magazines, films, CDs, the Internet, and other modes of dissemination. However, when an author assumes the responsibility of publishing their own work, the commercial nature of their activity hinges on the requirement that publication occurs through a project framework (Michael, 2023)

In this context, it is noteworthy to mention a regulatory effort enacted by the National Audio-Visual Media Council. In response to the appeals from news website owners, the Council introduced a distinct registry intended for online media enterprises. This action, however, could be characterized as cosmetic due to the council's advisory role, lacking executive authority as defined by Lebanese laws (Maharat, 2020).

8 .ONLINE PLATFORMS AMIDST DIGITAL LAW ABSENCE

In a nutshell, it can be said that the evolution of judicial jurisprudence has significantly broadened the reach of the Lebanese Publications Law issued in 1962. Despite the absence of electronic publishing and websites at the time of its enactment, the foundational definitions within this law have served as a touchstone for assessing their applicability to contemporary digital platforms (Michael, 2023). This legal evolution is underscored by the understanding that electronic publications, intended for continuous public distribution and distinct from private circulation, are now subject to the regulatory parameters outlined in the Publications Law. Nevertheless, legal restrictions have been applied partially to content rather than to the section related to the establishment of newspapers and the practice of journalism. This can be attributed to the rulings of the Publications Court, which have broadened the definition of newspapers to encompass electronic publishing (Michael, 2023).

Complementing this expansion is the Electronic Transactions and Personal Data Law No. 81 of October 10, 2018. This law introduced a precise definition of "transfer to the public by digital means," directly impacting digital media activities. It encompasses the dissemination of various digital content—textual, visual, auditory, and messages—designed for public or group consumption, excluding private correspondence. Moreover, this law placed certain obligations on individuals engaged in professional electronic publishing, notably concerning the disclosure of their identity, the nature of their activities, and their contact information (Michael, 2023).

These interim measures remain temporary, awaiting the emergence of a modern media law tailored to the rapidly evolving landscape. Such law shall cultivate a secure environment for journalists, while also promoting creativity among content creators and all sectors within the creative industries. Furthermore, it's crucial to highlight that this legislation should no longer exclusively address the digital realm. Instead, it must encompass the dynamics of the fourth industrial revolution, which revolves around technologies such as cloud computing, augmented reality, the internet of things, and advanced data analytics, among other transformative elements (Youness, 2023).

9 .ONLINE CONTENT

While online content and any content should be free within the limits established by law, speech offences in Lebanon are still regulated by the Penal Code which includes speech-related offenses that violate global standards of freedom of expression. For instance, Article 384 can lead to a two-year jail term for "insulting" the president (Internet Legislation Atlas, 2015). Lebanon's Penal Code contains numerous articles that lack clarity and are often used in cases related to freedom of speech. One particularly prominent example is Article 317, which prohibits actions that could ignite tensions or conflicts between religious or ethnic groups, carrying a potential sentence of three years' imprisonment (Chehayeb, 2020). All these limitations should align with modern standards to safeguard freedom of expression within the country.

10 .CONCLUDING REMARKS

Innovation and entrepreneurship are pivotal for the growth and sustainability of Lebanon's media sector. Legal, financial and structural challenges have profound implications for independent media and media startup development. By abolishing restrictive regulations and providing incentives, Lebanon can foster a more dynamic media startup scene, ensuring a diverse and vibrant media landscape that reflects the country's pluralism and advances media innovation. Collaborative efforts by the government, private sector, and media stakeholders are essential to create an enabling environment that supports media entrepreneurship and independent journalism. As per Samaha (2023), these challenges are not merely impeding innovation but are also hindering evolution. The judicial system is inactive, certain courts remain completely closed, and there is a lack of progress in jurisprudence and the rule of law, which could otherwise entice new investors to the country. Cherfane (2023) also emphasized the significance of legal awareness within the startup community, which often tends to prioritize marketing and business matters while neglecting the essential legal framework crucial for entrepreneurs and innovators. She highlighted that some businesses function without an official structure, subsequently facing adverse consequences.

10 .CONCLUDING REMARKS

The impact of these challenges on independent media is substantial, marked by a restricted plurality of media voices due to stringent licensing and registration requisites, resulting in a diminished array of media outlets and a consequent reduction in diverse opinions and perspectives. The complexity of regulatory procedures can dissuade independent media startups from entering the field, ultimately leading to a scarcity of alternative viewpoints.

In conclusion, the Lebanese media startup scene shall adapt more rapidly to emerging trends and technologies. To thrive in this competitive landscape, startups must remain agile, creative, and responsive to the evolving needs of their audiences and the media industry as a whole.

11 .RECOMMENDATIONS

The progression of the Lebanese media startup scene has been influenced by technological advancements but is also impeded by a range of challenges outlined in this paper. Based on the analysis in this paper, this section will put forward a set of recommendations aimed at various stakeholders:

Donors and Media Development Agencies: Donors are invited to refrain from imposing thematic grants tied to specific trends. This approach would grant independent media the essential flexibility to address subjects that genuinely resonate with the local context. Thus, the emphasis should be placed on core funding rather than project-based funding.

It is also essential to support the role of media development agents or actors that act as mediators between donors and independent media to help new initiatives find the right programs and grants. In fact, media development organizations can play a proactive role in facilitating the collaboration between alternative media outlets themselves while also assisting them in creating and optimizing their managerial, financial and audience reach strategies (Maharat, 2021).

11 .RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government: To counter brain-drain and boost the innovation culture in the country, it is time to improve the workflow and efficiency within public institutions. In this context, strengthening the judiciary's role remains also a key factor in ensuring accountability and promoting transparency.

The government can at least establish effective Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) between governmental entities and private enterprises. This strategic collaboration can offer substantial funding opportunities that contribute positively to various initiatives (Youness, 2023).

Moreover, there is an urgent need to update and enact long-awaited legislations, including the media law as alluded to earlier. The main added value of a modern media law besides all what was mentioned earlier is to create a safe environment for journalists to work (Akiki, 2023).

Higher Education Institutions: In the recent years, strides have been taken in the direction of offering entrepreneurship courses, but it's apparent that the implementation of such courses remains somewhat restricted in Lebanese Journalism and media schools. (Maharat, 2020). Thus, introducing a comprehensive entrepreneurship and innovation course can yield multifaceted benefits. The objective is to equip students with the practical knowledge and mindset needed to navigate the dynamic media industry, fostering their ability to identify opportunities and transform innovative ideas into viable projects.

Startups in General: The prevalence of digital content consumption due to increased smartphone usage and high-speed internet access presents an avenue for startups to create tailored content for digital platforms. To leverage this trend, startups could focus more and more on producing innovative and interactive digital content that resonates with the growing demand.

Furthermore, exploring the potential of virtual and augmented reality applications and artificial intelligence at the time being can enable startups to offer immersive storytelling experiences across various sectors, enhancing engagement and innovation.

11 .RECOMMENDATIONS

In an article titled "Data journalism road mapping: A conceptual approach to embrace data storytelling formats in the journalism business model" (2022), the data journalism style was described as a strategic differentiator. Thus, incorporating data-driven journalism can elevate the quality and relevance of media content, enabling startups to uncover unique stories and trends (Lima-Santos, 2022).

Additionally, mobile journalism has emerged as "one of the fastest areas of growth in the modern journalism industry" (Perreault & Kellie, 2019). Media startups can build on this trend to capture localized and authentic news coverage, thereby fostering a more inclusive and diverse media ecosystem. Lastly, given the possibilities unlocked by technological advancements, startups should adopt a more proactive stance in embracing emerging trends such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and big data analytics. (Younes, 2023).

Alternative Media in Particular: In an era dominated by artificial intelligence, prioritizing the human value is key (Ibrahim, 2023). Alternative media hold the capacity to provide not only fulfilling employment opportunities but also greater creative autonomy to individuals within the industry.

To survive and thrive, it is time also for alternative media outlets to carefully pick their legal structure and diversify the revenue streams for long-term viability. They cannot solely depend on grants which may provide substantial support in the initial stages but do not create successful business models on the long run. Furthermore, it is crucial for them to allocate increased attention to crafting their mission and vision statements. This involves not only writing these statements but also ensuring they are in line with the organization's objectives and available resources (Maharat, 2021). One last recommendation lies in the importance of improving creativity on the editorial level. Alternative media should lead, not follow.

12 .INCENTIVES FOR MEDIA STARTUPS

To foster a thriving ecosystem for media startups and encourage innovation, several strategies can be employed:

- 1 Launch dedicated funds and grants:** Introduce specific funding mechanisms and grants tailored to support media startups. This will incentivize risk-taking and nurture innovative ideas.
- 2 Enhance the role of incubators:** Bolster the role of existing incubators to provide comprehensive assistance to startups across all stages – from ideation to market entry. This holistic support will increase the chances of success (K. Khalil, personal communication, August 7, 2023).
- 3 Establish specialized incubators and accelerators** tailored specifically for the media industry (Khalil, 2023).
- 4 Offer tax incentives and financial support:** Offer tax exemptions and financial support to media entrepreneurs. This will contribute to the growth of a dynamic media startup landscape.
- 5 Organize student activities and competitions:** Develop a diverse range of activities and competitions targeted at university students. These initiatives will identify and nurture hidden talents, fostering a culture of creativity.
- 6 Expand the availability of competitively priced co-working spaces:** The aim is to provide robust support for aspiring young entrepreneurs.

12 .INCENTIVES FOR MEDIA STARTUPS

- 7** Prioritize upskilling for media professionals: This will enhance their expertise in the ever-changing field. This ensures that the workforce remains competitive and adaptable.
- 8** Provide comprehensive capacity-building programs for aspiring entrepreneurs: These programs must cover areas such as managerial skills and proposal writing in order to equip them with essential tools for success.
- 9** Reinforce the culture of press freedom and accountability: This underscores the vital role of alternative media as vigilant watchdogs and a crucial component of the fourth estate.
- 10** Develop innovative funding models to support media endeavours that serve the public interest: It is of utmost importance to diversify funding sources and strengthen independent media especially that till now the subscription-based model is deemed inappropriate by alternative media themselves (Maharat, 2021).

By implementing these measures, Lebanon can create a conducive environment for media startups, empower media professionals, and reinvigorate the crucial role of media as a cornerstone of democracy and societal progress.

Amid this gloomy picture, the Lebanese populace remains a beacon of hope, presenting an enticing aspect for potential advancements.

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