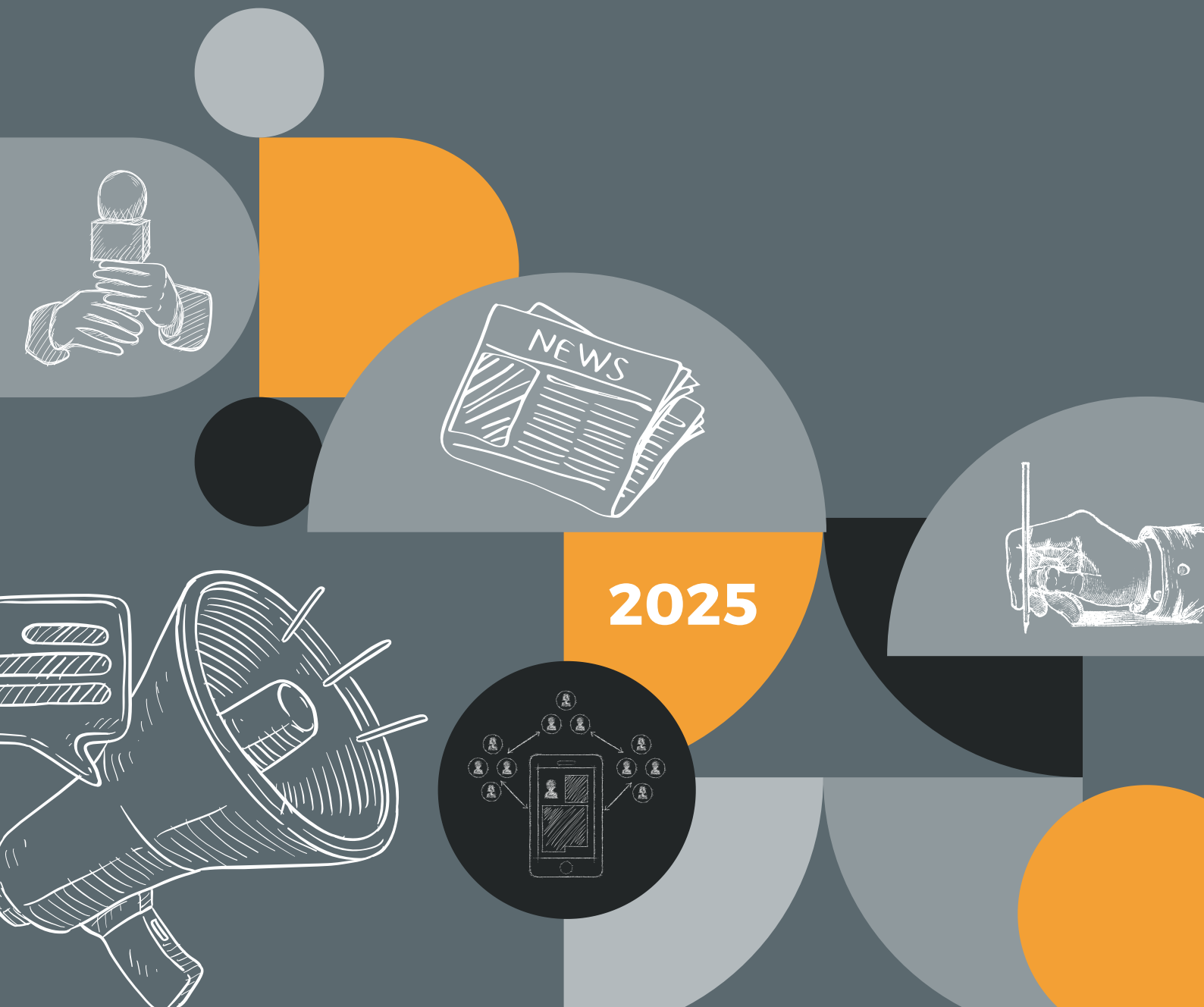


Media Viability Best Practices in The MENA Region

A Manual by Maharat Foundation



Media Viability Best Practices in The MENA Region

2025

Author:

Mia Crochot, Researcher

Contributors: Maharat Foundation

Roula Mikhael, Executive Director

Layal Bahnam, Program Manager

Hussein El Sherif, Researcher

Habib Akiki, Media Officer

Jalal Yamout, Journalist

Zahraa Abdallah, Journalist



©Beirut 2025

This manual was produced by Maharat Foundation as part of the “Support for Media in Crisis Situation” project implemented by Maharat Foundation with the support of DW Akademie and The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The images included in this report are sourced from publicly available materials or have been used with the explicit consent of the individuals depicted.



OUTLINE

I - Introduction	01
1- Understanding Media Viability	01
2- Maharat's Work on Media Viability	03
II - Justification and Methodology	04
1. Justification: The Specific Challenges of the MENA Region Amidst a Global Threat to Media Viability	04
2. Methodology	07
III. Best practices	10
1- Business Models: Monetization and Financial Sustainability	10
2- Best Practices in Developing Editorial Policies	23
3- Best practices in Marketing and Audience Engagement	28
4- Best Practices for Building Effective Partnerships	35
IV. Conclusion	39
References	42



Introduction

I

I. Introduction

1- Understanding Media Viability

This manual explores best practices for achieving media viability in the MENA region. By drawing on the experiences of seven alternative media platforms and insights from media viability experts trained in media management by Maharat and DW Akademie in 2018 and 2019; it provides practical guidance for alternative media platforms and other stakeholders working on media viability, offering strategies to enhance financial sustainability while safeguarding editorial independence and journalistic quality.

According to DW Akademie, media viability is the ability of media organizations and media landscapes to produce fact-based, quality journalism in a sustainable way. The importance of media viability lies in preserving a free and independent press and ensuring access to information, which is essential for holding power accountable and fostering democratic dialogue.

This manual draws on the DW Akademie's media viability model which emphasizes a holistic approach to media viability, focusing not only on the business models of media organizations but also on achieving a stable balance among five key dimensions: politics, economics, community, technology, and content.

This new model was introduced at a time when media organizations face significant challenges in delivering quality reporting while remaining financially sustainable, in the discussion paper titled "More Than Money – Rethinking Media Viability in the Digital Age," which was co-authored by the executive director of Maharat Foundation Roula Mikhael.

I Introduction

Maharat Foundation has been a significant player in advancing media viability in the MENA region. It played a key role in applying the Media Viability Indicators (MVIs) in Lebanon, selecting all interviewees for this pilot study that resulted in the report "Media Viability in Lebanon". Its executive director was later invited by DW Akademie to discuss the report's findings emphasizing the importance of contextualizing the results of media viability assessments to validate recommendations in any country. She also stressed the importance of distinguishing between mainstream outlets and alternative media platforms, which face distinct viability challenges due to their differing business models.



"The MVIs provide the basic elements and the foundation to study and monitor the situation, but the results need to be put in the context. That applies especially to the economic and political dimensions. The recommendations should take into consideration the existing media systems in a country".

Roula Mikhael, executive director of Maharat Foundation

This context-specific approach explains why this manual focuses exclusively on the MENA region. By drawing on the experiences of alternative media, it ensures that the best practices presented are both relevant and applicable to the unique dynamics of the region's media landscape and the specific challenges these organizations face.

I Introduction

2- Maharat's Work on Media Viability

2018 /
2019

- **Media Management Training:** In 2018 and 2019, 28 media professionals were trained through a 4-month course focused on successful media management. This training raised awareness and built expertise, empowering graduates to impact their media institutions or work as consultants to strengthen business models and improve journalism quality.

2018

- **University Curriculum Development:** In 2018, "Reimagining Journalism Studies" initiative was launched to help media faculties in the MENA region adapt their curricula to current market trends and foster entrepreneurship. The initiative included design thinking workshops with a diverse group of stakeholders.

2018/
Present

- **Support to Alternative Media Platforms:** Over the years, production support and consultancy were provided to alternative media platforms in Lebanon, helping them develop business plans, editorial policies, audience analysis, marketing strategies, innovative journalism formats, and enhance their financial management skills.

2023

- **Research and Studies on Media Viability:** Research and studies on media viability in the MENA region were produced, including topics like "Media Trends in Times of Change", "The Media and Information Landscape in Lebanon" and "Digital Media Startups in the Arab World." Maharat also participated in a national consultation on media viability in Lebanon in 2023 to help draft policy recommendations and identify national mechanisms that can address media viability issues.

Justification and Methodology

II

II. Justification and Methodology

1. Justification: The Specific Challenges of the MENA Region Amidst a Global Threat to Media Viability

Today, media viability is increasingly at risk as the digital transformation of the media industry disrupts traditional business models. One major challenge is the growing concentration of the advertising market. The UNESCO World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Global Report 2021/2022 highlights the rising threats to independent journalism, noting that just two tech companies—Google and Meta—now capture half of global advertising revenue. This dominance limits alternative media platforms' ability to secure advertising revenue, making financial sustainability even more difficult. Furthermore, social media algorithms pose an additional challenge for alternative media organizations by limiting their visibility online.

In addition to these structural shifts, media organizations have faced sudden shocks in recent years, including conflicts, pandemics and economic downturns. These factors, combined with unregulated digital platforms, declining public trust, and audience reluctance to pay for content, further threaten media viability by undermining sustainable business models, editorial independence, and the stability of media environments worldwide.

While media viability is under strain globally, alternative media in the MENA region must navigate not only these global challenges but also additional obstacles, including restrictive legal frameworks, media capture, and hostile environments for free speech.

Justification and Methodology



"In a region where alternative media face relentless financial, political, legal pressures and safety threats, sustainability is not just about survival—it's about resilience. Strengthening media viability means supporting alternative media to uphold press freedom and serve the public interest, despite the challenges."

Roula Mikhael, executive director of Maharat Foundation

The RSF 2024 press freedom ranking's political indicator has sharply declined in most MENA countries, "as authorities pursue their attempts to control the media by every possible means, including violence, arrests, draconian laws, financial pressure or manipulation of societal norms – all this compounded by systematic impunity for crimes of violence against journalists."

A major obstacle to alternative media is the absence of an enabling legal and regulatory framework. Many laws governing the media are either obsolete or overly restrictive, failing to support the free and reliable flow of information in the public interest. In Tunisia, for instance, the vague wording of Decree-Law No. 54 of 2022 has enabled the government to detain journalists critical of the president or the authorities. In Lebanon, media laws remain outdated and inconsistent with international standards, as defamation and blasphemy remain criminalized. Additionally, many countries in the region lack robust laws ensuring the right to information (RTI), making it difficult for journalists to access data necessary for producing fact-based information that serves citizens and the public interest. This further weakens the ability of media to fulfill their role as watchdogs and providers of reliable information.

Justification and Methodology

II



Beyond legal restrictions, media capture by political and business elites further threatens media viability. In Lebanon and Iraq, political parties dominate major media outlets, shaping content to align with their partisan agendas and limiting the diversity of perspectives available to the public. In Morocco, media control is concentrated among political and business elites, further limiting independent journalism.

From an economic perspective, the dire situation in many MENA countries threatens media viability. Citizens have limited purchasing power, further compounded by a lack of a culture of paying for media access, which threatens media viability. Furthermore, in many countries of the region, such as Tunisia and Lebanon, the advertisement market is limited and dominated by several large media companies, leaving independent outlets with few opportunities to secure sustainable revenue streams and making them heavily reliant on donor funding.

Justification and Methodology

II

2. Methodology

To develop the best practices outlined in this manual, Maharat Foundation conducted interviews with representatives from seven alternative media platforms across the MENA region, seven regional media viability experts, and the Agency for Equality, an ethical advertising agency. These discussions provided valuable insights into the operational challenges and strategies of these platforms helping to derive actionable best practices tailored to the region's unique media landscape.

Multiple interviews were conducted:

1. Interview with Walid Mejri, Director and Founder of Alqatiba - Tunisia.
2. Interview with Nora Younis, Editor-in-Chief; Awad Basit, Managing Editor; and Mohamed Osama, General Manager and Business Development Officer of Al-Manassa - Egypt.
3. Interview with Salam Omar, Media Consultant at KirkukNow - Iraq.
4. Interview with Issam Oreqat, Co-founder of Al-Hudood Network - Jordan.
5. Interview with Alia Ibrahim, Co-founder and CEO of Daraj Media - Lebanon.
6. Interview with Emile Al-Jaf, Editor-in-Chief of Yalla- Iraq.
7. Interview with Jean Kassir, Co-founder and Managing Director at Megaphone- Lebanon.
8. Interview with Wael Akiki, Program Manager at Samir Kassir Foundation, and Rana Khoury, Director of Agency for Equality, a non-profit agency supporting independent media in Lebanon and the Middle East and North Africa region.
9. Interviews with media viability experts, including Mohamed Al-Moumin, Sobhiya Najjar, Mirna Bassil, Hanene Zbiss, Hassane Chaaban, and Leyla Echafaqi.

II Justification and Methodology

Additionally, a survey was conducted to further refine the manual's development. The survey and expert interviews helped identify key media viability areas, establish the essential components and structure of the manual, and define criteria for selecting media platforms that exemplify viable media models in the region.

- **Selection Criteria for Media Platforms**

The media platforms featured in this manual were chosen for their role as alternative media organizations, offering distinct narratives and perspectives compared to mainstream or traditional media, while also differing in content, production, and distribution. Alternative media typically consists of smaller or emerging platforms, often digital, that challenge mainstream discourse and serve marginalized communities, such as women and communities outside major cities, as well as niche audiences. They are sometimes also referred to as independent media because they are independent from large media corporations and they claim complete independence over their editorial policy.

Justification and Methodology

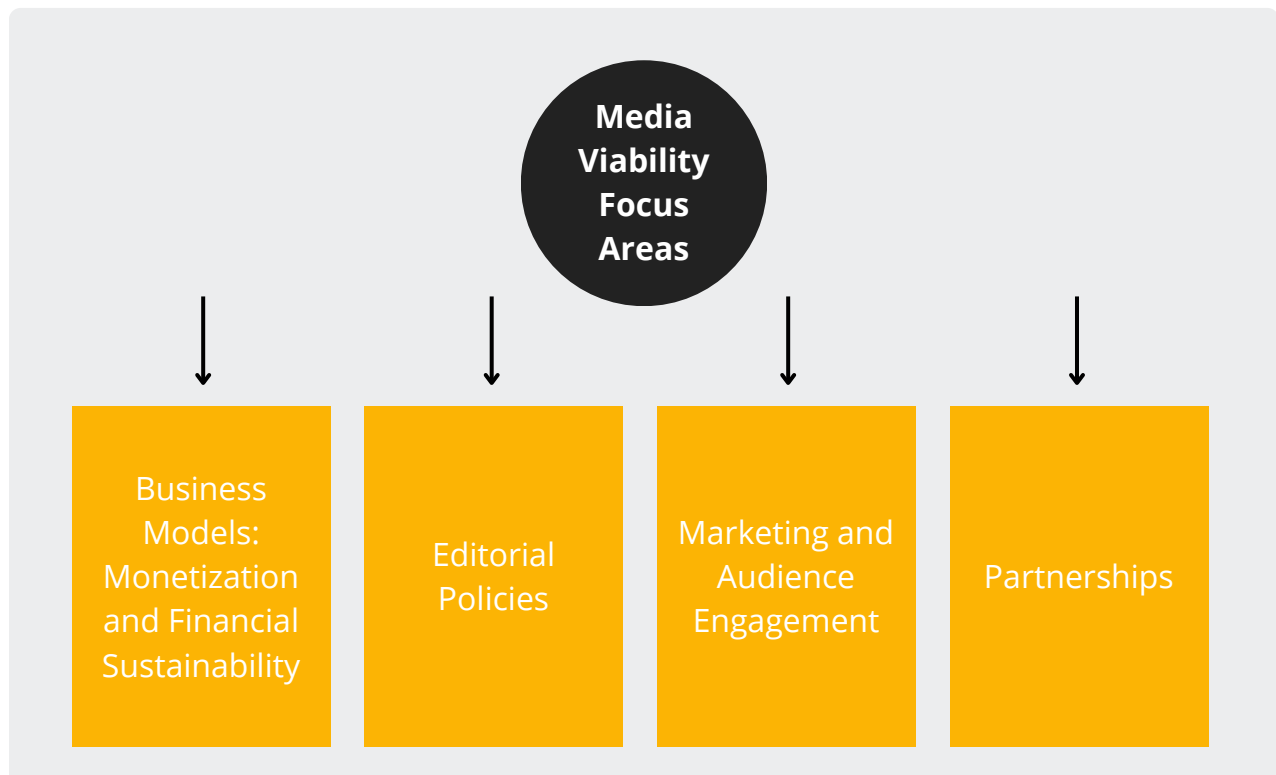
II

In addition to their alternative approach, the selected platforms demonstrate:

- A minimum level of financial sustainability, with diversified income sources.
- High-quality content and innovative storytelling.
- Consistent audience engagement and reach.
- Editorial independence and credibility.
- Scalability and adaptability, ensuring that their best practices can be applied in diverse contexts across the MENA region.
- Geographical representation, ensuring coverage of different media landscapes within the region.

- **Media Viability Focus Areas**

The survey data highlighted four key areas essential to media viability in the MENA region, which form the core focus of this manual:



Best practices

III

III. Best practices

This section highlights the best practices employed by the interviewed alternative media platforms, along with insights from the Agency for Equality, and media viability experts in the Middle East and North Africa, to ensure viability across four key areas.

1- Business Models: Monetization and Financial Sustainability

A strong business model and the diversification of revenue sources are essential for media sustainability. Alternative platforms across the MENA region have adopted various innovative strategies to navigate financial constraints and ensure long-term viability.



"Independent journalists are the driving force behind alternative media platforms in the MENA region, yet many lack an entrepreneurial mindset, focusing solely on content creation. Through our media viability initiatives, we aim to shift this mindset, empowering journalists to become entrepreneurs who think strategically about sustainable business models alongside quality journalism."

Roula Mikhael, executive director of Maharat Foundation

Best practices



1.1 -Establishing a Clear Business Model and Sound Financial Management



Achieving sustainability requires implementing robust financial management practices and developing clear, structured business models that define tasks, vision, strategy, and editorial direction while assessing strengths and weaknesses. **Media viability expert Sobhiya Najjar** emphasizes that establishing sound financial strategies and training teams to recognize their importance are essential for long-term viability. Platforms without a solid business model risk financial instability and eventual failure.



Drawing from Daraj's experience in Lebanon, success also hinges on forming a dedicated revenue team, setting clear priorities, and strategically planning how and when to allocate resources. This includes navigating shifting conditions and making swift, data-driven adjustments informed by the experiences of other institutions to adapt to unexpected challenges and opportunities.

Developing an effective business model requires thorough research, such as studying global examples and learning from similar platforms that have faced comparable challenges. Daraj exemplified this approach, using insights from other organizations to craft a sustainable and resilient business model.

Best practices

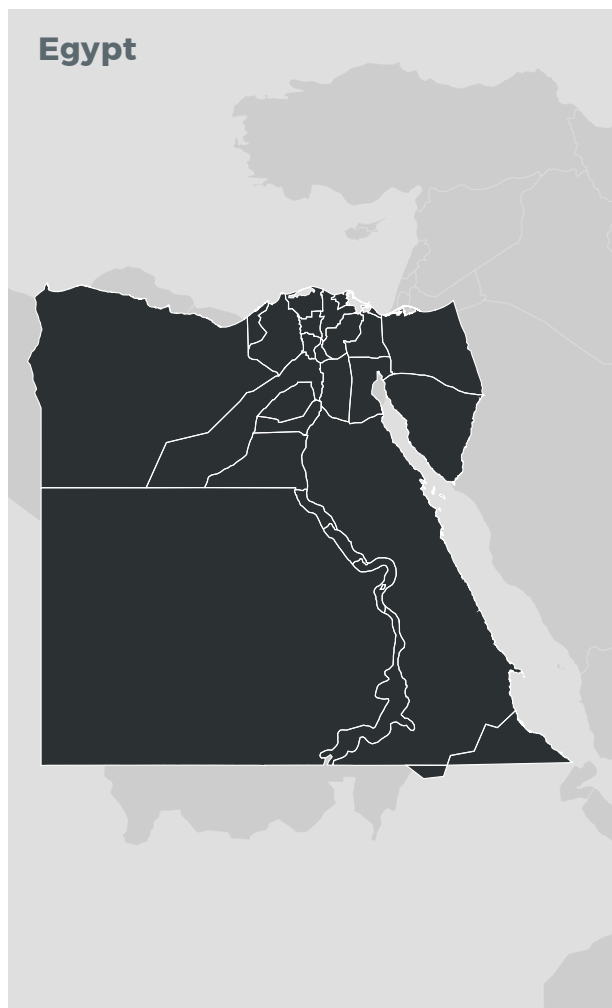
1.2 Diversification of Revenue Sources

Ensuring income from multiple, diverse sources has proven effective in stabilizing funding for platforms, helping them move beyond reliance on grants. According to interviews with media viability experts from the MENA region, platforms that achieve even minimal financial sustainability often succeed by diversifying their income streams and embracing self-reliance. In contrast, platforms that fail to adopt diverse funding strategies remain dependent on grants from donors, leaving their financial sustainability vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities.



Diversifying revenue streams enables platforms to leverage their expertise in various ways, ensuring financial independence, operational continuity and editorial integrity. For example, Al-Manassa in Egypt has successfully utilized multiple revenue streams by offering media services such as content production, report editing for other organizations, translation services, as well as technical consultancy such as web development. Additionally, they launched the Al-Manassa Academy two years ago, which provides paid training for institutions, further bolstering their financial resilience.

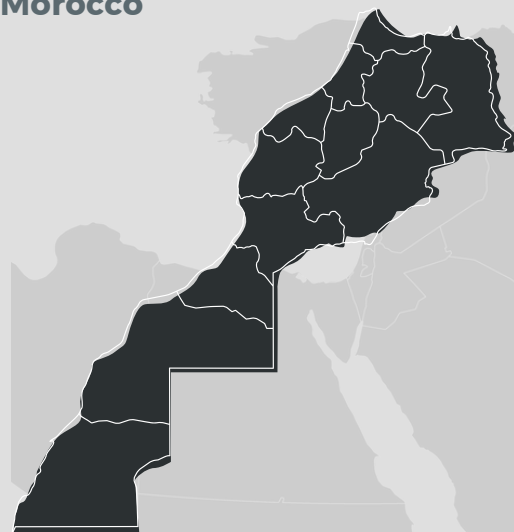
Egypt



Best practices

Similarly media platforms in Morocco that have endured over the years have also demonstrated the importance of diversification. These platforms implement hybrid business models that include a mix of advertisements, paid subscriptions, sponsored content, and consultancy or training services.

Morocco



In the same vein, media viability expert Mohamed Al-Moumin highlighted the success of the East Iraq Agency, where he collaborated as part of a program to train female journalists. He explained:



"One of the key aspects we focused on was diversifying the organization's resources through the viability triangle mechanism, ensuring that the organization always has three diverse sources of income."

Mohammed Al-Moamen, Media Viability Expert

However, it is important to note that developing models based on offering services requires substantial human resources and specialized skills. Alternative media platforms with limited resources, particularly startups, may face significant challenges in implementing such models. This was evident in Morocco, where, according to expert insights, several emerging platforms struggled to sustain such models due to a lack of expertise and adequate staffing.

Best practices



1.3- Diversifying revenue streams can be done through various ways:

Paid Content Models

Introducing paid content models, such as exclusive articles, or subscription services, offers a direct way to monetize a platform's audience. For instance, platforms that offer premium content to subscribers can generate a reliable income stream. The adoption of such models helps platforms to shift from a reliance on grants to a more stable and predictable financial model.

According to Wael Akiki, Program Manager at Samir Kassir Foundation:



"Platforms used to think that all the content they produce should be free. While the idea is appealing, it is equally important to consider financial sustainability, as it guarantees independence".

Wael Akiki, Program Manager at Samir Kassir Foundation

However, several factors make it challenging to generate significant income through a subscription model. In Lebanon, for example, the dire economic situation, the collapse of the banking sector, limited access to online payment options, and the absence of a culture of paying for media content all create substantial barriers.

Best practices

III

These challenges are not unique to Lebanon as many other MENA countries also lack a culture of paying for media access, compounded by limited purchasing power, further complicating the viability of subscription-based models.

For such models to succeed, they would need to target a specific niche audience, those who are financially secure. Countries with a large diaspora such as Lebanon can leverage this audience which remains interested in staying informed about developments in their home country.

Donations

Additionally, digital platforms can enhance their financial sustainability by setting up crowdfunding pages, allowing individuals to contribute donations directly to support their work.



Both Daraj Media and Megaphone have adopted this approach. While crowdfunding can serve as a source of income, particularly for platforms with strong community engagement and trust, it is typically complemented by other revenue streams. In low-income countries of the MENA region, relying solely on individual donations can be challenging, making complementary funding strategies essential for financial stability.

Best practices

Leveraging Expertise through Specialized Services: Offering Training, Content Production and Consultancy Services

Developing and offering specialized services, such as training in investigative journalism, data journalism, and digital journalism, as well as content production, and consultancy services, creates diverse opportunities for financial sustainability.

Hassane Chaaban, an expert in media viability, highlighted the success of this approach, citing the example of Ana Hon in Lebanon. The platform successfully diversified its income by offering services. According to Hassane Chaaban:



“Diversifying revenue sources through media services helped the platform reduce its dependency on grants and make progress toward financial sustainability”.

Hassane Chaaban, Expert in media viability



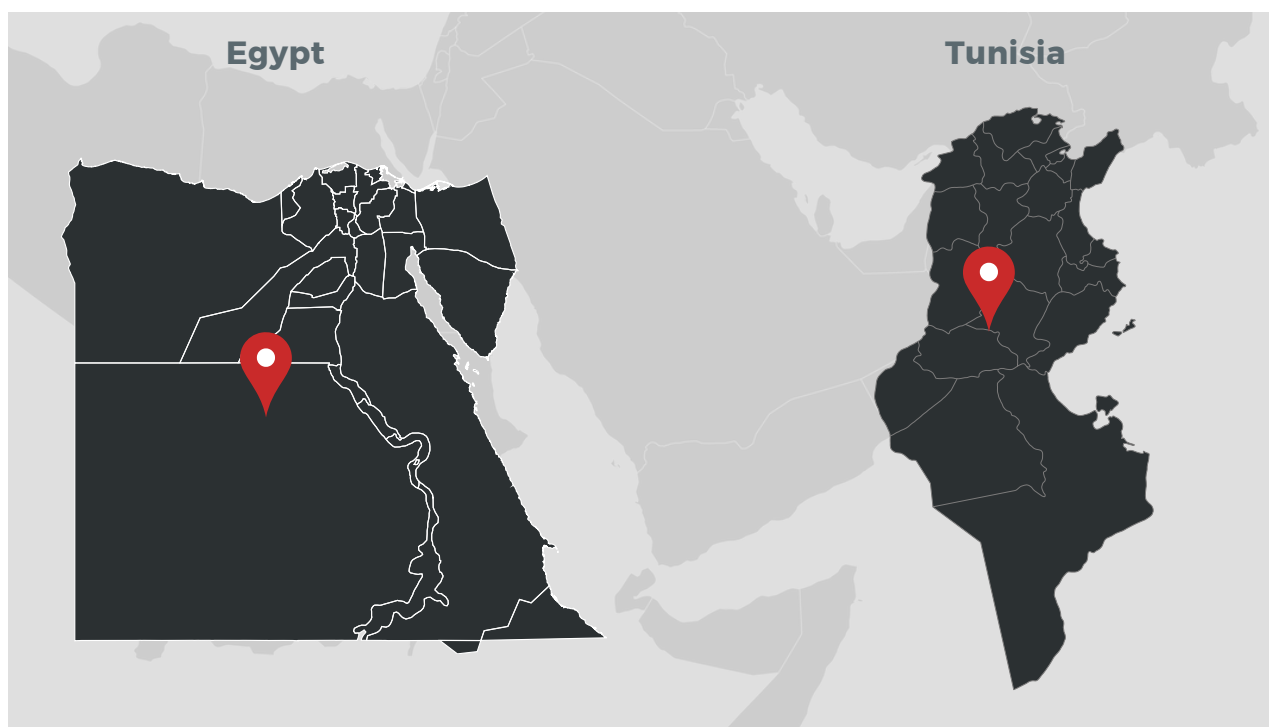
Megaphone also highlighted the importance of offering services to generate revenue, including content production and training, with the latter proving to be the most financially beneficial. Two years ago, the platform began leveraging its team's expertise to support smaller newsrooms and nonprofit organizations, assisting them in enhancing their social media strategies and improving their news and report production. This approach has since become a valuable asset.

Best practices

In addition, consultancy services such as project-based evaluations, strategic advice, and tailored solutions for organizations represent another valuable revenue stream for alternative media platforms. Technical consultancy services related to web development also serve as a means for platforms to diversify their funding.

Additionally, producing and monetizing content, such as custom reports, podcasts and documentaries, enables platforms to generate additional revenue.

Platforms like Al Manassa in Egypt and Alqatiba in Tunisia exemplify this approach of combining various revenue streams by offering training programs, consultancy services, and content production to ensure financial sustainability. Their success demonstrates the value of leveraging internal expertise to create new revenue streams and reduce reliance on external funding.



Best practices

"From Grants to Growth – Maharat's Service-Based Model for Sustainability"

To enhance financial sustainability while maintaining its commitment to media development and freedom of information, Maharat Foundation has introduced a service-based model that generates revenue through specialized services.



"To sustain long-term impact, Maharat must move beyond short-term donor funding and build a self-sufficient model that aligns with local needs while adapting to shifting donor priorities. This ensures the continued growth of investigative journalism and media sector development."

Roula Mikhael, executive director of Maharat Foundation

Revenue Streams:

- **Training & Capacity Building:** Providing tailored programs for media professionals, NGOs and INGOs, corporates, and universities.
- **Consulting & Research Services:** Offering expertise in digital communication, misinformation risks, and media monitoring.
- **Develops subscription-based or customized social listening, media monitoring & fact-checking tools for clients.**

Best practices



Revenue Streams:

- **Media & Digital Services:** Developing multimedia content that aligns with Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Tailored Media and AI Literacy programs:** Equipping individuals and organizations with the skills to critically engage with media content and understand the ethical implications of AI in digital communication.
- **Strategic Communication & Visibility Services:** Producing innovative content, organizing events, and implementing advocacy campaigns.

Social Impact:

- Strengthens independent journalism and freedom of expression by reinvesting revenues into impactful media initiatives.
- Empowers journalists, civil society, and businesses to navigate digital risks and regulatory challenges.
- Promotes ethical and sustainable media practices through research, knowledge-sharing, and advocacy.

Best practices

New Advertising Strategies: Collaborating with Ethical Advertising Agencies for Revenue Diversification

Insights from industry experts reveal that relying on advertising revenue can be problematic for alternative media platforms. Such reliance often compromises their editorial independence and, consequently, their credibility with the public. For example, Kikuk Now faced significant challenges when considering advertisement funding, as many potential advertisers had political or economic interests that conflicted with the platform's principles.

To address this issue, alternative media platforms can strengthen their financial sustainability by partnering with nonprofit media agencies that specialize in ethical advertising connections. These agencies help platforms diversify their revenue streams through marketing and advertising while safeguarding their editorial integrity.

One notable example is the Agency for Equality, a joint initiative by the Samir Kassir Foundation's (SKeyes) Center for Media and Cultural Freedom and the Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM) organization. This agency supports independent media in Lebanon by providing sustainable and tailored solutions to ensure their financial stability and independence. Unlike traditional media agencies, the Agency for Equality operates as a nonprofit organization, working exclusively with alternative media platforms.



"Our role is to connect potential clients with independent platforms, enabling these platforms to secure diversified revenue streams through marketing and advertising."

Rana Khoury, Director of the Equality Agency

Best practices

"Every platform we have engaged with has expressed interest in participating."

Rana Khoury, Director of the Equality Agency

She also highlighted the agency's rigorous vetting process to ensure alignment between clients and platforms:

"We work exclusively with independent media platforms, thoroughly verifying their editorial policies and financial independence. Additionally, we ensure that the client shares the platform's values before facilitating a connection."

Rana Khoury, Director of the Equality Agency

Examples of successful campaigns launched in 2023:

- Back-to-School Content: Collaboration between Bassma Association and platforms such as [Nakd](#), [Beirut Today](#), and [Al-Rawiya](#).
- Impact of War on Women: A campaign by Abaad Organization published via the [No2ta platform](#).

Best practices



1.4 - Balancing Mission-Driven and Commercially Driven Content

A proven best practice for media sustainability is balancing mission-driven content, like investigative journalism, with commercially viable material, such as lifestyle topics. This approach ensures platforms can generate revenue to subsidize high-cost, mission-critical reporting such as investigative reporting.

For instance, at its inception, Daraj Media in Lebanon prioritized investigative journalism while introducing lifestyle content to attract investors. While investigative journalism remained the platform's cornerstone, the founders recognized that its high production costs and limited profitability required additional revenue streams to cover operational expenses. According to Daraj co-founder Alia Ibrahim:



"Commercially driven content was designed to cover the costs of investigative reporting."

Alia Ibrahim, co-founder and CEO of Daraj Media

This dual-content model allowed Daraj to continue producing investigative journalism while achieving financial sustainability, a strategy that can be adapted by other alternative media platforms.

Best practices

2- Best Practices in Developing Editorial Policies

A well-defined editorial policy is essential to the viability and success of alternative media platforms. It establishes the foundation for content planning, production, and audience engagement, ensuring the platform's identity and vision stand out in a competitive landscape. Balancing editorial independence with the production of quality news content that serves societal needs further reinforces trust and credibility, both crucial to achieving long-term viability.



"Editorial independence is the backbone of a media platform's credibility and long-term viability. A well-defined editorial focus ensures alignment with each platform's mission and vision, allowing them to cater to specific audience needs and enhance relevance. Maharat's core support to media platforms centers on strengthening their editorial identities, enabling them to serve the public interest and uphold journalism as a pillar of accountability and democratic values."

Roula Mikhael, Executive Director of Maharat Foundation

2.1- Maintaining a Clear Editorial Line and Professionalism

The existence of a clear editorial line requires the development of a clear editorial policy, which is fundamental to achieving media viability. An editorial policy should include the platform's commitment to editorial independence, content guidelines, tone and style, audience engagement approach, conflict of interest rules, advertising and sponsorship policies, processes for corrections and accountability, adherence to legal and ethical standards, and a framework for crisis management. Furthermore, alternative media platforms should develop editorial plans that define fixed publishing schedules, methods for selecting topics, and approaches to coverage.

Best practices



In essence, the organization must have a clear editorial line that establishes its identity and distinguishes it from others.

Expert Sobhiya Najjar highlights the importance of this approach in achieving viability, stating:



"I usually recommend maintaining a strong commitment to the platform's vision and editorial direction. Additionally, I emphasize the importance of consistent content production and persistence, even with a small team. Many platforms that followed these guidelines successfully progressed and grew over time."

Sobhiya Najjar, Expert

Platforms with experienced professional journalists and adequate resources are often better positioned to develop and maintain clear editorial lines. For platforms with limited expertise or experience, seeking external consultants can be a valuable strategy for developing clear editorial policies and plans, provided they have the financial resources to invest in such support. Platforms like AlHudood Network and Alqatiba have successfully employed this approach by engaging external consultants to develop and refine their editorial lines.

Furthermore, experts highlighted the importance of fostering a collaborative editorial environment by clearly defining roles and responsibilities within the team, as this approach enhances content quality and operational efficiency.

Best practices

III

2.2- Ensuring Editorial Independence While Producing Quality Content That Serves Society

Ensuring **editorial independence** while producing quality content that serves society is essential for building trust, engaging audiences, and ensuring viability.



Platforms like Al3omk Almaghribi have demonstrated that adhering to democratic values, human rights and professional editorial practices, enabled the platform to produce quality content that serves society. This approach not only attracts readers and earns their trust but also fosters credibility with advertisers.



Similarly, this editorial focus on quality content that serves society is key to KirkukNow, as this platform provides accurate information on minorities, marginalized groups such as internally displaced persons and refugees, freedom of expression, and verified information for residents in disputed territories in Iraq across multiple languages (Arabic, Kurdish, Turkmen, English). This editorial focus has played a significant role in KirkukNow's long-term sustainability.

Best practices



The success of Megaphone can also be attributed to their focus on producing specialized, high-quality content tailored for social media, targeting specific audience needs, as its aim is to bring Lebanese politics closer to audiences that feel alienated by traditional media.

Editorial independence is a cornerstone of media viability, yet its preservation depends on funding and revenue models that actively support it rather than compromise it. For instance, the Iraqi platform Yalla carefully evaluates and accepts grants based on their alignment with the platform's editorial priorities, rejecting funding that contradicts its core values. This commitment has allowed Yalla to maintain objectivity and credibility while producing reliable content.

Hence, an independent editorial policy that supports quality journalism, whether through covering stories of interest to different societal groups; informing the public to foster accountability; serving as a watchdog over those in power, or focusing on marginalized communities and human rights; is not only key to fostering trust but also plays a crucial role in the overall viability and sustainability of alternative media platforms, especially in a diverse region like MENA.

Best practices



2.3. Balancing Contributed and In-House Content While Preserving Editorial Integrity

The editorial policy of a media organization can incorporate citizen participation, allowing individuals to contribute articles to their communities while preserving editorial integrity. For instance, Al-Manassa ensures that outside contributors produce 50% of their content, with anyone outside the in-house team referred to as a "contributing journalist," while the in-house team handles the remaining content.

From the outset, the platform has utilized technology to enable users to create accounts, set up personal pages, and submit drafts of journalistic content without discrimination.

Mohamed Osama, General Manager and Business Development Officer of Al-Manassa :

"Anyone can have the chance to publish their work and receive editorial support without needing connections. Acceptance and rejection are based solely on the quality of the content, not the individual."

Mohamed Osama, General Manager and Business Development Officer of Al-Manassa

This approach empowers citizens to actively participate in informing their communities, which is a key aspect of media viability.

Best practices

3- Best practices in Marketing and Audience Engagement

Effective marketing and audience engagement are crucial for the viability of alternative media platforms. This section highlights best practices used by platforms to leverage internal expertise and utilize social media and digital tools to attract and retain audiences, while also emphasizing the importance of direct audience interaction to build trust and loyalty. It also highlights successful innovative strategies used by these alternative media platforms.



"In an era of rapid digital transformation and information overload, alternative media must go beyond quality journalism by strategically engaging audiences to ensure viability. Maharat has been working with platforms to explore techniques such as social listening and audience analysis, leveraging insights to better understand audiences and innovate new formats that effectively reach target groups."

Roula Mikhael, Executive Director of Maharat Foundation

3.1- Leveraging Internal Expertise for Marketing and Promotion

Building in-house marketing and audience engagement teams to align promotional strategies with the platform's editorial vision and objectives has proven beneficial for many platforms. Some platforms like Megaphone have created a dedicated department for research and innovation to develop innovative formats that will drive audience engagement. The majority of platforms interviewed rely exclusively on internal teams for marketing. For platforms like Alqatiba, which initially lacked the financial resources to hire dedicated marketing roles, tasks were divided among team members under the supervision of the editor-in-chief until one of the existing team members was appointed as the community manager to focus on audience engagement.

Best practices



This approach can be replicated by platforms with limited resources. Relying on internal teams ensures a deep understanding of the platform's values and audience needs, fostering consistent and impactful engagement. This model is particularly effective for journalism focused on politics, public interest, and news events, where external marketing may lack the necessary depth or alignment with editorial goals. However, once platforms acquire sufficient resources, they can consider collaborating with specialized agencies to benefit from the professionalism and valuable expertise that external marketing companies can provide.

3.2- Building a team with Specialized Skills to Strengthen Marketing Efforts

Alternative media platforms should prioritize hiring and training journalists with diverse and specialized skill sets to meet the demands of modern content creation and audience engagement, strengthening marketing efforts. According to media viability expert Leyla Echafaqi from Morocco, key skills to cultivate within the team include:



1. Multimedia proficiency: Team members should develop strong skills in photography and creating short, engaging reels and videos specifically tailored for social media platforms.



2. Branded content expertise: Journalists should be capable of producing branded content that is innovative and aligned with audience interests, using compelling story ideas to engage users effectively.

Best practices



3.3- Innovative Marketing Strategies Used by Platforms include:



- **Empowering Journalists to Actively Promote Content:**

Utilizing in-house studios (when available) to film brief explanatory videos by journalists to promote their investigative work and empowering journalists to actively engage in promoting their content, as implemented by Alqatiba.



- **Leveraging the Participatory Nature of Journalism for Organic Growth:**

Leveraging the participatory nature of journalism, as seen with Al-Manassa, where contributors share their articles within their personal networks is another best practice. This dual promotion strategy effectively markets both their content and the platform, creating an organic and automatic marketing network. Over the past two years, this approach has significantly increased the number of followers across all their social media platforms.



- **Producing Specialized, High-Quality Content, for a Niche Audience:**

According to media viability experts Hanene Zbiss and Leyla Echafaqi, and drawing respectively on the Tunisian and Moroccan experience, platforms that succeed in the competitive media landscape often focus on delivering specialized, high-quality content tailored to the interests and needs of specific audiences. By addressing niche topics with journalistic excellence, these platforms distinguish themselves, build a loyal audience, and attract the interest of advertisers, sponsors and partners.

Similarly, in Iraq, platforms that have achieved media viability have managed to build unique brand identities and establish a clear image of their specialization. Whether focusing on investigative journalism, environmental issues, or freedom of expression, these platforms demonstrate that aligning content with a well-defined niche can effectively position them in the media landscape.

The experience of platforms like [180 Post](#) also demonstrate that aligning content with specific audience interests enhances viability. According to media viability expert Mirna Bassil, 180 Post expanded its readership by offering in-depth analyses aimed at building bridges between Arabs, which aligned with its readers' interests.



- **Leveraging Social Media, Data Analytics and Digital Marketing tools**

Platforms typically rely on social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, for content promotion or publication.

According to experts, successful platforms in Morocco have leveraged social media to reach a broader audience, investing in data analytics tools to understand audience behavior. This strategy has been key in identifying the content formats that resonate most with audiences, such as short videos, infographics, and podcasts, which stand out in the highly competitive digital landscape.

Similarly, according to media viability experts, platforms in Lebanon, like 180 Post, have effectively utilized social media and data-driven insights to guide content creation, attracting a wider audience by tailoring their content to the interests of their followers. In Tunisia, successful platforms engage their audiences through preferred social media channels, ensuring their content aligns with user preferences.

Developing innovative formats on social media is also key, as demonstrated by the experience of Megaphone. The platform created video formats that met the needs of the news team while aligning with the requirements of social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. It also developed typologies and protocols for crafting video text and designing visuals to capture attention on social media.



“ Since users make quick decisions about whether to watch a video, we focused on ensuring that within the first few seconds, they could immediately understand why it was worth watching. The same approach applied to photos and cards, designed to grab attention, highlight key information, thereby engaging users.”

Jean Kassir, Co-founder and Managing Director at Megaphone

Furthermore, experts also highlight the importance of leveraging digital marketing tools such as SEO to increase content visibility and improve search engine rankings, while using newsletters to foster direct engagement, build relationships with subscribers, and keep the audience informed, complementing the reach gained through social media.

Finally, it is also important to mention that the usage of social media is crucial in countries like Egypt, where authorities block websites and censor content that is critical of the government. Consequently, platforms like Al-Manassa primarily rely on social media due to persistent blocking. Hence, leveraging social media can enable platforms to maintain their visibility, reach audiences, and bypass censorship and restrictive measures.

Best practices

3.4 - Strengthening Direct Audience Engagement

- **Using internal team for responding to audiences**

Prompt and transparent interaction with the audience fosters trust and loyalty while enhancing a platform's credibility. Alternative media platforms should actively consider feedback from social media and news websites, using tools like a dedicated email address for receiving messages and complaints.

Establishing a dedicated team to monitor and respond promptly to audience interactions, such as comments, complaints and correction requests can be considered a best practice, fostering trust and credibility. For example, Al3omk Almaghribi has implemented this approach by maintaining a dedicated team that actively engages with its audience.

Alqatiba platform adopts another approach, allowing all the team to respond to the audience, which can be more suitable if the platform has limited resources.



"Regarding audience interaction, those who send us private messages are responded to almost immediately, as the entire team has access to our Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms. The person responsible for answering a specific inquiry responds accordingly".

Walid Mejri, Director and Founder of Alqatiba

To ensure consistent and accurate communication, the entire team should be well-trained, knowledgeable about the platform's editorial policies, and familiar with all published content.

Another effective practice, particularly when resources are limited, as employed by Yalla in Iraq, involves assigning the Editor-in-Chief to oversee messages and prioritize responses to important ones.

Best practices

- **Leveraging feedback:**

Using audience feedback to guide and refine content where appropriate has proven effective in fostering a culture of accountability and responsiveness. This approach reinforces the platform's connection with its audience and builds long-term credibility.

Converting audience input into actionable outcomes, such as developing stories based on valuable suggestions or correcting verified errors, is a key element of this practice.

Al-Manassa and Al3omk Almaghribi serve as successful examples of leveraging audience feedback to enhance credibility and foster trust.



Al-Manassa demonstrates transparency by issuing public corrections when mistakes are identified, thereby strengthening audience trust.



Al3omk Almaghribi maintains a strong relationship with its audience by receiving dozens of messages and complaints via email daily. A specialized team reviews these submissions and transforms them into news stories when appropriate.

Best practices

4- Best Practices for Building Effective Partnerships

Effective media partnerships are essential for alternative media platforms in the MENA region to ensure viability. By leveraging various types of partnerships, alternative media platforms can access critical resources, expertise, and visibility, while also limiting costs and maintaining editorial integrity. The following best practices outline strategies to build strong partnerships that support media viability.



"Maharat has been conducting studies and creating spaces for informed debates on media viability through events, conferences, focus groups, and roundtables, fostering meaningful exchanges that help media organizations identify sustainable partnership models. By facilitating discussions between media professionals, donors, and experts, we have highlighted the role of strategic partnerships—whether through grant funding, editorial collaborations, or institutional alliances—in supporting independent journalism while preserving editorial integrity."

Roula Mikhael, Executive Director of Maharat Foundation

4.1. Diversify Partnership Types:

Using various types of partnerships, aligned with a clear brand identity to support a flexible and sustainable business model, is one of the strategies platforms use to ensure viability.



Promotional Partnerships:

- **Joint Advertising:** Coordinating marketing campaigns that promote both partners, leveraging each other's audience for enhanced visibility. For example, AlHudood Network utilizes joint advertising.
- **Content Promotion Partnerships:** Partnering with platforms to publish and promote content, recognizing their large audience as a valuable asset for reaching a wider demographic, as seen with Yalla. Similarly, Daraj Media republishes content from other platforms that share its values.

• **Grant Partnerships:**

Establishing grant partnerships is essential for securing funding while maintaining editorial independence. In the MENA region, alternative platforms often rely on donor funding. Grants offer financial support that can cover a wide range of organizational expenses, ensuring that platforms can sustain their operations without compromising editorial integrity, as long as the grants do not impose editorial restrictions.

• **Expertise Partnerships:**

Collaborations with universities or academic institutions can provide platforms with access to specialized knowledge, enabling the production of high-quality content. These partnerships allow platforms to address niche topics with greater authority, enhancing their credibility and strengthening their position within the industry.

• **Specialized Services Partnerships:**

Alternative media platforms can diversify their revenue streams by offering specialized services, such as journalism training or content production for other organizations, in exchange for financial compensation. For example, Al-Manassa has formed partnerships with various organizations, securing contracts for paid training programs. These partnerships are valuable in optimizing resource utilization and enhancing the quality of reporting across the region.

Editorial Partnerships:

- **Content Exchange:** Platforms collaborate to exchange content such as articles, videos, or other media types to expand their reach and diversify content offerings. This is practiced by platforms like Al3omk Almaghribi, AlHudood Network, and Yalla. This type of partnership also involves exchanging information for articles including investigative reports. This type of partnership does not involve any financial returns.
- **Shared Production:** Co-producing content such as documentaries, podcasts, reports or articles allows platforms to combine expertise and limit costs for mutual benefit.

Best Practice in Combining Partnership Models: Insights from Megaphone's Experience

A best practice from Megaphone's experience involves combining different types of partnerships: producing content for others, co-production, and training. While training services proved to be the most financially beneficial, co-production emerged as the most beneficial for the team. Unlike producing content for external clients, co-production keeps content in-house, allowing the platform to maintain a continuous workflow and avoid the disruptions caused by external projects, maintaining operation efficiency. This approach not only supports revenue generation but also ensures that the team's efforts contribute directly to Megaphone's own editorial output.

Best practices



4.2. Leverage Local and International Partnerships:

Partnering with international and local actors, such as municipalities, ministries, universities, local CSOs, other alternative media platforms, international media development organizations and donors has been recognized by media viability experts as a best practice. These partnerships provide platforms with access to funding, expertise, and training opportunities, while also enhancing visibility and credibility. In Morocco, for instance, some platforms failed due to weak collaboration with academic institutions and international media organizations, leaving them without essential expertise and funding for sustainability. Media viability experts also highlighted successful partnerships between alternative media platforms, noting that shared values and orientations foster solidarity among these entities. These partnerships primarily revolve around content exchange, offering mutual benefits while supporting visibility and operational sustainability. Partnerships between digital platforms and international actors are also crucial, as the latter not only provides grants to support the financial sustainability of platforms but is also interested in collaborating with them on service-based partnerships. For instance, rather than engaging foreign experts, international donors now turn to Megaphone for some of their training needs.

A notable example of leveraging both local and international partnerships is Yalla in Iraq. It exchanged content with reputable actors, such as Deutsche Welle (DW) and The Iraqi Network for Investigative Journalism (NIRIJ), enhancing its visibility and credibility.

Best practices



4.3. Align Partnerships with Audience Trust and Platform Credibility:

Forming partnerships that reinforce credibility while avoiding affiliations that compromise independence has proven to be an effective approach, as demonstrated by KirkukNow's priorities in Iraq.



"While several large organizations have expressed interest in partnering with KirkukNow to associate their names with its reputation, the platform prioritizes maintaining audience trust and avoids affiliations that could compromise its credibility".

Salam Omar, Media Consultant at KirkukNow:



Conclusion



IV

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, media viability in the MENA region remains a complex but essential goal for sustaining independent journalism. This manual has outlined best practices that alternative media platforms can adopt to enhance their financial sustainability while maintaining editorial independence and journalistic quality. By leveraging innovative business models, diversifying revenue streams, implementing clear editorial policies, and fostering audience engagement, alternative media platforms can build resilience in an increasingly challenging environment. Additionally, the emphasis on partnerships plays a crucial role in strengthening media viability while ensuring content credibility and trust.

However, specific contextual challenges in the MENA region, compounded by global constraints on media viability, necessitate a more flexible approach to support. This includes core funding, capacity building, and providing opportunities for innovation and partnerships. Moreover, there is a need for continued work on the legal environment to enable media startups to grow and thrive, allowing journalists to safely fulfill their watchdog role. The insights gathered from alternative media platforms and experts highlight that while financial sustainability is a key challenge, audience-centric approaches and maintaining editorial integrity remain central to long-term success. The evolving digital landscape, economic pressures, and political constraints require alternative media platforms to continually innovate and tailor their strategies to their unique contexts.

By implementing the best practices outlined in this manual, alternative media platforms can take significant steps toward building a sustainable, independent, and impactful media ecosystem in the MENA region. Ultimately, fostering a diverse and financially viable media landscape is not just about survival; it is about ensuring that quality journalism continues to serve the public interest and uphold democratic values.

Introduction to Platforms

NAME OF THE PLATFORM	BRIEF
<u>Al3omk</u> <u>AlMaghribi-</u> <u>Morocco</u>	<p>Al3omk AlMaghribi online newspaper was founded in October 2015 as a comprehensive media platform covering politics, sports, economy, society, and arts. It was initiated as an independent youth initiative by journalist Mohamed Laghrouss after 13 years of professional experience in national and Arab newspapers. It advocates for the marginalized and contributes to raising awareness through news and education, helping citizens make informed choices and navigate the intellectual, political, and ideological debates in Morocco. It also empowers them to participate more actively in public affairs, hold officials accountable, and engage with governance.</p>
<u>Alqatiba</u> <u>Platform -</u> <u>Tunisia</u>	<p>Alqatiba is an online news magazine focused on investigative journalism, data journalism, and storytelling. Its investigative projects include projects on migration, corruption, resources, arms trafficking, and more. Founded in 2019, Alqatiba is part of an NGO, Taqallam for Freedom of Speech and Creativity, that is dedicated to fighting corruption, enhancing transparency, defending democracy, and promoting gender equality.</p>
<u>Al-</u> <u>Manassa-</u> <u>Egypt</u>	<p>The platform began in 2016 as a participatory journalism website publishing articles produced by freelance journalists and "citizen journalists." It started with a small team of three editors providing editorial support and professional guidance for those wishing to publish their journalistic content. From its inception, the platform has focused on publishing topics that do not receive attention in mainstream media.</p>
<u>KirkukNow</u> <u>- Iraq</u>	<p>KirkukNow is an Independent electronic news website that publishes stories and covers events taking place within or relevant to Iraq's disputed territories, as defined in the Iraqi constitution, with the aim of promoting coexistence in those areas and providing easy access to information.</p> <p>In April 2011, www.kirkuknow.com was launched as an online news agency, the only independent media outlet that covers developments throughout the disputed territories in Iraq in the three main languages of these areas - Arabic, Kurdish and Turkmen- as well as in English.</p>
<u>AlHudood</u> <u>Network -</u> <u>Jordan</u>	<p>AlHudood is a satirical Arabic news publication founded July 2013. It originally focused on satirical journalism in Jordan, and came to encompass news from the Arab world and from around the world, working with Arab writers and cartoonists from different parts of the Middle East and North Africa.</p>

Introduction to Platforms

Daraj Media **- Lebanon**

Daraj is an independent digital media platform created by experienced journalists in 2016.

Its goal is to offer Arabic speakers an alternative kind of journalism, free from political funding and influence, which controls other mainstream Arab media institutions.

The platform publishes investigative pieces, op-eds and feature stories in a variety of formats: written, visuals, video, and audio.

Daraj covers important issues with a focus on under-reported topics like women and minorities' rights, environmental and climate changes, freedom of thought, belief and expression, and gender identity.

Yalla **Network -** **Iraq**

Founded in 2015 by young Iraqi journalists, Yalla aims to present authentic stories free from the political influences that dominate most Iraqi media platforms. The platform focuses on youth, women's empowerment, and other issues relevant to the public. By encouraging meaningful debate on critical topics, Yalla pushes boundaries while respecting diverse perspectives. Through this approach, it fosters online communities that bridge national divides across a range of thematic areas.

Megaphone **- Lebanon**

Megaphone is an online independent media platform. It produces explainer multimedia content that covers current affairs as well as social and cultural commentaries, in formats adapted for the digital media.

Megaphone aims to question, critique, and counter the narratives of the political establishment, and engage young audiences in the public debate, which, in turn, will foster accountability.

It also aims to tell the stories of marginalized groups that are discriminated against and excluded from public discourse.

Agency for **Equality** **(AE)** **Initiative -** **Lebanon**

SKeyes together with the Equal Rights and Independent Media (ERIM) organisation, established the Agency for Equality to provide sustainable and tailor-made support to independent media in Lebanon by ensuring their independence and financial stability. The agency aims to promote pluralism, critical thinking and access to quality information, and to ensure high-quality coverage of key issues of public interest in Lebanon

References

- 1- DW Akademie. (2019). More than money – Rethinking media viability in the digital age. Deutsche Welle. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://akademie.dw.com/en/more-than-money-rethinking-media-viability-in-the-digital-age/a-47825791>
- 2- DW Akademie. (2021). Media viability in Lebanon: Applying DW Akademie's Media Viability Indicators (MVIs). Deutsche Welle. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://akademie.dw.com/en/foreign-fundinghypercompetition-new-insights-into-challenges-for-media-viability-in-lebanon/a-58165420>
- 3- UNESCO. (2022). Journalism is a public good: World trends in freedom of expression and media development, global report 2021/2022. UNESCO. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000380618?2=null&queryId=0a30ee11-7640-48c0-b1c3-8d7e1e5dc867>
- 4- DW Akademie. (2023, April 14). What is media viability? Deutsche Welle. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://akademie.dw.com/en/what-is-media-viability/a-65310115>
- 5- Reporters Without Borders. (2024). Middle East - North Africa- Journalism Throttled by Political Pressure. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://rsf.org/en/region/middle-east-north-africa>
- 6- International Journalists' Network. (2024, May 17). Ahead of the presidential election, Tunisia's media freedom is eroding. Retrieved December 16, 2024, from <https://ijn.net.org/en/story/ahead-presidential-election-tunisias-media-freedom-eroding>
- 7- ARTICLE 19. (2024, September 30). Right to Know Day: Progress on access to information in the MENA region despite challenges. Retrieved December 16, 2024, from <https://www.article19.org/resources/right-to-know-day-progress-on-access-to-information-in-the-mena-region-despite-challenges/>
- 8- Reporters Without Borders. (2024). Lebanon. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://rsf.org/en/country/lebanon>
- 9- Reporters Without Borders. (2024). Iraq. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://rsf.org/en/country/iraq>
- 10- BBC News. (2024, October 28). Morocco media guide. BBC News. Retrieved January 15, 2024, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14123019>
- 11- Free Press Unlimited. (2022). National consultations on solutions to promote media viability while preserving media independence: Consultations on media viability in Brazil, El Salvador, Indonesia, Jamaica, Lebanon, Namibia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, and Tunisia. Retrieved December 15, 2024, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000382721>

Media Viability Best Practices in The MENA Region

Maharat Foundation

Address:
Jdeideh, Matn
Lebanon

Contact Information:
Website: maharatfoundation.org
Email: info@maharatfoundation.org

Cover page photo: © Canva Pro



مهارات
Maharat

© Beirut 2025

