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Assessing conditions for inter-firm collaboration as a revenue strategy for politically pressured news media

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ABSTRACT

The struggle to find resilient journalism revenue models is nowhere starker than for exiled or politically pressured news media operating in fragile markets. One route forward is to explore inter-firm collaborations as a *modus operandi* to achieve more financial resilience through a collaborative approach amongst themselves. This article presents findings from a multi-stakeholder atelier that assessed operational revenue conditions for such media. It presents a co-created definition of collaborative revenue capture, then addresses the conditions and forms for collaborative structures. It conceptualises opportunities in four areas: technology, revenue-based systems, coordinating actions and journalism production. The article adds new knowledge by assessing collaborations as a revenue strategy within the under-researched media development area through a participatory mode of inquiry.

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Introduction

There is broad institutional recognition that diversity in the news media should not be hindered due to economic failure, as set out in UNESCO's Mass Media Declaration of 1978 and the Declaration of Talloires in 1981 (Alleyne, 1997). Yet this struggle to find stable and "diversified revenue sources" (UNESCO, 2015, p. 8) is a fundamental challenge since the loss of control over audience-content-advertising relationships has squeezed journalism revenues globally. The precipitous losses from traditional advertising (Hirst, 2011; Turow, 2011), disrupted audience-content relations due to a rise in search engines and social media (Carr, 2009) and news aggregators (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018) has challenged the entire industry. It is a long and more perplexing road than anticipated to find sustainable revenues (Rosenstiel & Jurkowitz, 2012). While there is consensus that a "viable economic model for media in the digital age will necessarily rely on a multi-dimensional revenue model" (Pavlik, 2013, p. 192), the conundrum of how to make a profit or grow remain largely unanswered (Lu & Holcomb, 2016). Scholarly calls therefore seek an on-going process of reflection because "there is no panacea for media development, media sustainability and sustainable journalism and no universally applicable solution" (Picard, 2017, p. 253).

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The revenue question for exiled and politically pressured news media as a specific type of media organisation is a pertinent challenge (Cook, 2016; Deane, 2013; Ismail, 2018) yet one that is often neglected in media business studies. Such media offer lessons in revenue model adaptation for the media management community seeking models outside corporate legacy media as they survive under the same paradigm shifts in modes of consumption, competition, data and production affecting news media globally, including the dominance of Google, Facebook and Yandex (Gicheru, 2014) and experience similar restrictions to other niche news media in their limited capacity to generate revenues due to a lack of business acumen and skills (Schiffrin, 2017). But they also offer a rich terrain for experimentation as they grapple against short-term shocks, patchy audience data, under-resourced and over-worked teams and from unfavourable political economic factors. Issues of money inevitably fall behind those of safety and security. Poor infrastructure inhibits distribution while limited viable advertising threaten the viability of conventional revenues, and lack of access to training and talent undermines the quality of editorial content (Robinson et al., 2015). They operate either within or outside weak markets dominated by corruption and media capture (IREX, 2018; Pon et al., 2017), where local populations have limited buying power (Jiménez et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2017). As they face particularly bleak economic prospects, they face constraints that require “new kinds of business thinking” (Deselaers et al., 2019, p. 3). The extreme operational cases being faced paves the way for transferable knowledge to media in other developing markets seeking alternative understanding of the sustainability question.

Given the economic challenge, there has been long-standing state and philanthropic financial support. Exact figures on how much international aid and philanthropy flows to politically pressured media are very uneven, both for pragmatic and bureaucratic reasons (Myers & Juma, 2018) as an ever-growing range of civil society organisations, donor-funded intermediaries, private foundations as well as those tied to public service broadcasters or similar bodies have emerged. In all, most media development and media for development literature focusses primarily on the implications of international donor aid: how and what media donors are doing (Deane, 2013; Susman-Pena, 2012); the impact of soft censorship (Podesta, 2009) and so on. There is far less scholarly scrutiny of how these decisions impact on economic practice. Yet the overall trend is media operating in these contexts are under increasing pressure to move away from grant dependency and demonstrate some steps towards revenue diversification, triggered by concerns of the constraining and enabling functions of donor funding. Reliance not only entraps media in a cycle of alignment with shifting donor agendas but also hinges on a dichotomy: successful applications for donor funding rely on being financially weak (Cook, 2016a). Private grants can also have the effect of content bias, with funds being channelled to topics of importance to the donor (Schiffrin, 2017; Wright et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, evidence from empirical data on the revenue models of oppositional news outlets identified potential revenue diversification from a partnership approach, finding “revenues may be as likely to emerge from pooling resources and content as they are around discrete media outlets” (Cook, 2016, p. 531). In authoritarian contexts, operating “collaboratively, transparently, and ethically” may have short term implications on productivity and profitability but lay stronger foundations for sustainability among media teams, as well as with readers and advertisers, in the long run (Sakr, 2016, p. 45). Industry practice illuminates potential new revenues from inter-firm

approaches: pooled content and common publishing platforms such as Nordot in Tokyo or Dutch online news aggregating platform Blendle; commercial partnerships between media of different sizes such as Mediacités with Mediapart in France; advertising reach and scale from shared platforms such as collaborative advertising networks like publisher-led programmatic advertising marketplace MCIL Multimedia Sdn Bhd for nine participating media (Cook, 2019) or Krama ad platform, a bespoke classified ads platform, developed by and for independent media, especially regional and local as an alternative to Russian-based Yandex ad system, on which many Belarusian online media are dependent (Cook, 2020).

A research gap exists at the intersection of these discussions. Firstly, where there are no universally applicable solutions to the revenue challenge of heterogenous exiled and politically pressured media, and we know little about moves away from grant dependency towards more diversified revenue models, this prompts inquiries into new approaches. Then, as practitioners lead the way on new collaborative ways of working, they legitimise therefore research that asks how once-regimented journalism economic logics are being negotiated and, potentially, reshaped. Addressing the research gap, the central inquiry here asks in what ways exiled or politically pressured media might be more financially resilient through a collaborative approach amongst themselves. Rather than approaching the issue of income at the individual firm level, it proposes to address similar needs through a collaborative response.

Firms interact with each other and across their networks in complex ways. Therefore, this study draws on an action-oriented two-day atelier to explore collaboration between media facing similar revenue challenges. This was a valid approach as Prenger and Deuze (2017, p. 235) suggest innovation is a moving object raising the issue of “how to adequately study something so dynamic”. The intention was to gain a holistic view of the patterns of behaviours and discourse to further understand collaborations as experimental practice in determining revenue opportunities among media in exile or politically pressured environments beyond donor dependency.

The article begins with the contextual literature on economic practice within authoritarian regimes and reviews the gap in knowledge on revenues specifically. Methodological considerations are addressed so as to critically review the participatory mode of inquiry. The study contributes to the media management field in different ways. Firstly, it assesses the operational revenue conditions for exiled and politically pressured media at the time of investigation. The co-created definition for collaborative revenue capture as a firm-level approach to form an actionable partnership to open new revenue opportunities in the digital economy follows. Then it assesses the conditions that can facilitate inter-firm collaborations for revenue generation. Most pertinently, it details digital technologies for inter-firm collaborations. Then, four main conceptual areas for collaboration are identified: technology, revenue-based systems, coordinated actions and journalism production. This leads to summative discussions on the appetite for collaboration as a strategic tool for inter-firm organising enabled by digital technology. The findings connect to the broader digital journalism field and provide insights that offer utility to media development programme managers at the national and international level.

Literature review

Politically pressured news media

Politically pressured environments are identified as such from official development assistance listings such as eligibility from the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and media system rankings and indices including the Media Pluralism Monitor, Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, IREX, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Exiled is a subgroup of diaspora with a temporary and uncertain state, living outside their homeland and providing journalism back in-country. The most common reason to go into exile is the threat of violence, such as from Somalia and Syria. Others flee the threat of prison, especially in Iran, where the government deepened its crackdown ahead of elections (Schilit, 2013). Scholarly scrutiny is limited to studies showing exiled journalists' motivations for societal change (Balasundaram, 2019; O'Loughlin & Schafrad, 2016; Skjerdal, 2011) and an examination of peripheral actors' motivations and conceptualisations of their roles (Belair-Gagnon & Holton, 2018; Eldridge, 2017; Schapals et al., 2019). Ownership structures are often distinct from conglomerate chains, with an unaffiliated output online, complemented by social and mobile, and in some cases with print products (either legacy or new), radio (often shortwave) or broadcast. Teams are typically small and cross-border, relying on some full-time professional journalists. Therefore, while traditional news media structures "are still producing most of the news we consume today" (Domingo et al., 2015, p. 53), this discussion departs from the majority of investigations by moving the lens away from established media organisations and attending to the omission of business concerns and economic practice among exiled and politically pressured news media.

Business and revenue challenges

Scholarly work on the business aspects of independent media in politically pressured or weaker environments is particularly limited. There is no one successful model and a pressing need to better understand media management and data analytics (Foster, 2014, 2017). General economic challenges through a period of political transition, such as in Bosnia (Taylor & Kent, 2000) have been charted as have barriers to opening media operations (Hughes & Lawson, 2005), and looking at issues sustaining operations (Requejo-Alemán & Lugo-Ocando, 2014). A tactical and strategic lens finds oppositional Syrian media operating in exile in Turkey deploying a complex system of self-censorship, official registration and adaptable production in order to survive when "outgunned relative to the institutional actors they need to work with" (Badran, 2020, p. 70). This study goes further by drawing together international perspectives from media organisations in multiple contexts.

The revenue model is the overall configuration of incomes that make up financial resources, as only one part of the firm's broader business (Linder & Cantrell, 2000; Picard, 2011). The first academic study of the revenues of news media in exile and politically pressured environments empirically detailed grant funding, earned income and donations (Cook, 2016). A taxonomy model advanced understanding of income in free markets compared to repressed markets, detailing the extensive challenges in economic practice. It found mixed revenue models or cross-subsidising of media

businesses with complementary for-profit business activities is growing in developing countries. Alternative revenue strategies have been developed through experimentation into memberships or subscriptions in Latin America (Breiner, 2017); native and affiliate advertising in India (Sen & Nielsen, 2016) or adjacencies to complementary activities such as consulting services, public relations and book sales (Ismail, 2018). Warner and Iastrebnier (2017) reviewing 100 digital native start-ups in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico found revenue diversity is critical to sustainability. More focus has been given to the African context, where the lack of economic viability is a major constraint. Good content, development of media management capacities, and local audience research are needed to develop local advertising markets that serve local media (Madon et al., 2009; Mhlanga, 2017; Spurk & Dingerkus, 2017). Revisiting journalism startups in the Global South, Schiffrin (2019) found financial survival was the biggest worry, followed by political risk and physical safety. After three years, the outlets remained dependent on donors. Together, these drive inquiries to explore the operational revenue conditions for exiled and politically pressured media and potential new and diversified revenue strategies.

Programme work has addressed a gap in this field by focussing on capacity building (Veendorp, 2011) and business skills through toolkits or sprints (Deselaers et al., 2019). The FOJO Media Institute drew the lens specifically on media in exile as “an undervalued area” that “often fall between the cracks” (Hughes, in Ristow, 2011, p. 22), with their intervention programme between 2013–2015. This responded to a number of challenges of business sustainability by journalists in exile (FOJO, 2013) but stopped short of exploring inter-firm collaborations.

Conceptual parameters for collaboration

Given the particularly stubborn and contested challenge of journalism sustainability for exiled or politically pressured news media, the challenge here was to assess how once-regimented economic logics are being reshaped in ways that might make such media more financially resilient through a collaborative approach amongst themselves.

In the business literature, scholars have studied inter-firm collaboration through symbiotic strategy for several decades (e.g. Varadarajan & Rajaratnam, 1986). The most important characteristic is to develop and maintain a mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship with external parties where there is neither significant conflicting interests nor fierce competition for common resources (Li et al., 2012). A symbiotic relation in the proximal environment is defined in terms of collaboration, co-evolution and cooperation (Li et al., 2018; Sagarin, 2013). Dimensions of symbiotic relations include time frame, proximity, number, focus, scope (Varadarajan & Rajaratnam, 1986) and trust (Li et al., 2018). In other forms of strategic alliances, partners may still have conflicting interests or power struggles. The phenomenon of cooptation (Bengtsson & Kock, 2000; Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1997) reflects an increasing awareness of the complexity of relations between economic agents. By drawing from the business literature towards media development, the paper contributes to new perspectives.

Within the journalism literature, there has been extensive assessment of partnerships between media for converged route-maps to overcome competitive pressures and organisational difference. Certainly, tactical and structural convergences are rapidly

expanding and there is an appetite in practice to collaborate in ways not seen before by mainstream corporate news (Myllylahti, 2017). Convergence can include cross-promoting content, cloning, coopetition, content sharing, and inter-firm collaborations (Dailey et al., 2005) through partnerships. Dailey and Spillman (2013) examined the level of cooperation that exists between cross-media and the types of newsroom partnerships that have emerged, including those with digital native media. Exploring the willingness of different types of media to collaborate, Hatcher and Thayer (2017) found public broadcasters, community newspapers, and online news startups to have an openness to experiment with collaboration and content sharing but tensions around intense competition for advertisers. Such collaborations can bring win-win (Pathania-Jain, 2001) and prompt the inquiry to explore forms of collaborative structures and success factors.

Looking for opportunities beyond closed walls draws from the “open” concept. Sill (2011, p. 1) makes the case for open journalism as a way to save journalism as a company, based on a problem-solving mentality through collaboration between media that “once ignored each other’s work”. Scholars suggest journalists can adapt to newsroom cutbacks by forming symbiotic relationships with non-media news providers, including local police (Carson et al., 2016) and educational institutions (Kim et al., 2016). The works suggest the need to dive more deeply into collaboration in multiple forms, such as how resources could be pooled (Drew & Thomas, 2018) or economic relations nurtured. The potential of these exchanges to spawn open innovation approaches (Chesbrough, 2003, 2010) is based on independent actors possessing diverse knowledge assets that can be used to create novel combinations (Crossan & Inkpen, 1994). Regional cooperation in South Africa between a coalition of media organisations, civil society actors, advocacy platforms, and funders fostered cross-pollination of ideas, enhanced capacities by pooling expertise and resources while also providing solidarity and fraternity (Wasserman, 2021).

Within the broader context of who is involved in the news making context, scholars have drawn attention to the importance of rethinking such news firm boundaries. Sakr (2017, p. 298) notes in his assessment of sustainable digital news in Egypt that “the implication is that scrutiny of collaborative and innovative practice may tell us more about the sustainability of journalism in a precarious and rapidly changing environment than a focus on any specific institution.” Singer (2011, p. 109) also suggests new economic structures will emerge to sustain journalism asking “what sorts of collaborations will prove valuable and how will they be nurtured, strengthened and extended?” As little is known about how collaborations form or the affordances of such, it is this exploratory gap the paper fills. Through an empirical approach of practitioner-led knowledge creation the focus drills into four questions:

- What are the operational revenue conditions for exiled and politically pressured media?
- How can collaborative revenue capture be articulated and defined?
- What conditions can facilitate inter-firm collaborations for revenue generation?
- What are the conceptual areas for inter-firm collaborations?

Methodology

A participatory mode of action-oriented inquiry was designed in the form of a two-day atelier. It included a series of facilitated panels, activities and knowledge exchange, held in December 2014. Forms of ateliers hold particular interest because they represent an important type of “strategic episode” (Hendry & Seidl, 2003) as they suspend normal structures and engage in new conversations. The overall aim was to step back from daily operations and institutional priorities. Space to think in this way is rare, particularly for oppositional media facing authoritarian pressures. Given that revenue challenges varied across global regions, participants were invited to the atelier in Preston, UK. Journalists operating media under threat representing Iran, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Syria and Sri Lanka, Jordan, Azerbaijan and Ukraine (11) were included. No specific exclusions on media platform or company were made, as the goal was to enable broad ideation away from their immediate concerns and firm-contained perspectives. All operated on digital platforms, with varied specialisms across broadcast, print, web and radio subject to licence and distribution restrictions. Representatives from the media development community included Rory Peck Trust, Open Society Foundations and Internews Europe (3) alongside journalism experts and innovators (6) business experts (4) and academics (6). In total, there were 30 participants. As such, the multidisciplinary atelier was designed to integrate numerous perspectives on practice, industry, media development, media for development, academia and activism appropriate for the complex and holistic view needed to stimulate new knowledge on revenue models. The view of Van De Ven (2007) led this inquiry in that knowledge is produced not only in academia but also in industry.

There were six genres of activities that formed data collection: idea brainstorming via an ideas wall; small focused discussion groups; structured anonymous question and response sessions; mini presentation panels; plenary discussions; and an ideas lab to move forward towards market and development. The process allowed issues that practitioners themselves regarded as problematic to be singled out and then explored, appreciating the call by Küng (2016) to stay in constant contact with the industry in order to co-formulate a research inquiry. Together, this stimulated ideation on what forms and purpose collaborations could take and what would be of most use to exiled media organisations. Participants were encouraged to develop imagined futures quite freely by developing five collaborations as experimental projects for application. These were developed using mixed media visualisations and into mini presentations for group feedback articulating the key proposition and need met. A further development phase gave teams the opportunity to explore and work up in more detail the strongest ideas, with input from a wider group of participants. Group discussions, constructive critique and next steps drew the atelier to a close. Data was captured by two facilitators and the researcher, and a multimedia practitioner captured photographic evidence of hand-written notes and brainstorming activities. Anonymous digital tablet-activated interactive brainstorming software was used to capture observation discussions.

Findings from this workshop form the primary material analysed. The participatory mode of inquiry transferred also to the early data analysis. The embedded nature of analysis in a social setting allowed for ongoing review through interactive brainstorming software viewed on a digital wall and activated from hand-held tablet devices. This

enabled participants to vote in real time on responses to structured questions, analyse responses into themes, connect topics and sub-topics, and see word clouds. During idea brainstorming via the ideas wall or World Café discussions, participants synthesised discussions and clustered action points. Developing visualisations of the data assisted in summarising and categorising to aid understanding and interpolating. These included drawings, mind maps and collages in both physical and digital form. In a similarly structured process by which data, analysis, and interpretation can be integrated into the analytical, Northcutt and McCoy (2004) refer to this type of method as interactive qualitative analysis.

The second phase of analysis was carried out by the primary researcher after the atelier to offer a systematic reading of the data. An open-access immersive report was produced to offer a first review and collection of the multimedia outputs (Cook, 2015). This atheoretical output included word clouds and images to avoid premature closing and a first filter about what was done, how and why. Writing up in this way can assist learnings and prompt further reflection (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). This was also a way to advance the research findings into academic lexicon so as to “pack them differently for different audiences” for scholarly conventions, bridging theory and practice (Rohn & Evens, 2020, p. 22). The qualitative data outputs from the atelier were then outputted in list form and then treated with applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) to build a comprehensive, contextualised and integrated understanding of the structured data outputs. Preliminary explorations of the free form responses were grouped to find higher level categories appropriate for clustering and emerging interrelationships within responses and discussions. Patterns were noted and developed into “thematic connections” from the data (Bazeley, 2013, p. 192) and further synthesised into table form. While the study is limited due to the time between investigation and publication, revisiting atelier findings is justified as material gathered in this way is rare. It also corresponds with renewed interest in other collaborative journalism business models to which the findings are relevant, including franchise (Arnold & Blackman, 2021).

Findings

Operational revenue conditions for exiled and politically pressured news media

An overarching theme was surviving economically rather than sustainability. In the wider landscape, large state-controlled media extracted the largest share of advertising markets and exiled media were disconnected from valuable domestic advertising opportunities. Participants spoke of challenges around regulation, establishing legal status and cash flow in unbanked situations exacerbated by restrictions on registering businesses. Often state-controlled telecommunications companies blocked exiled media websites which suppressed domestic audiences. They came under serious cyber-attack, needing defences which impact website uptime and performance. Audiences also used proxy servers. For example, a reader based in Iran visiting an exiled media site using a US based proxy server appears to advertisers as being in the United States. An advert served in this context is likely to have limited click-through and financial return. Similar challenges existed using major social media platforms such as Facebook, where audience data was flawed. This affected the ability to connect with and engage with end users. These

challenges existed against a backdrop of shifting wider technological changes that were little understood. There was consensus that politically pressured news media had less support than in other media systems.

A deeper understanding of lived revenue experiences was achieved. There was a sense that going beyond “living to fight another day” to emerge a longer perspective on funding was a challenge, particularly around revenue diversification away from grant dependency. Expertise in revenue models and innovation were found to be lacking. Output quality levels were variable. Internal to their operations, participants spoke of limited time, resource and capacity for running the business under already strained health and welfare circumstances working long hours alone with limited skills, affecting their quality of life and safety to operate. Many were overworked, under-funded and living hand-to-mouth. Challenges included the need to cover their costs for staffing, website development and hosting, administration and their own living expenses. Concerns were raised around the need to have a “proactive rather than a purely reactive strategy” towards their business. Longevity was a concern due to lack of strategy, robust media management skills, lacking skills to facilitate or adapt to change and having funds to hire more people. Networks were recognised as a source of potential strength within the target country. Participants were asked what determines their financial resilience. Responses ranged from internal (needing diverse funding sources, ability to balance the mission with sustainability, business competence) and external (security, anonymity and safety; the scale of the audience and market, cash flow where formal banking was not possible, and challenges around regulation).

There was a broad orientation around measures of success. Consensus was around the need to “have an impact – whatever that impact may be”. Success definitions oscillated from basic functions such as needing to be kept safe, achieving opportunities to move back in-country and structuring efforts to protect journalists. Many participants had first-hand experience of intimidation or atrocities. Success was getting past government controls with a consistent and regular broadcast, then reaching a well-defined audience or widening visibility. The goal was relevant or credible content, having exclusivity and achieving sharable content focussing on under-reported, misreported or censored stories instead of soft news “being a real voice that’s credible”. Broader impact success included influencing in-country and diaspora civic values. Some sought governmental change on democratic processes. For others influencing Western news agendas and conversations was impact particularly where those led to policy change for fairer or more just societies.

Defining collaborative revenue capture

A new term was introduced to develop and debate the proposed concept and its principles, to incite self-reflection and changes in practice. The co-created definition of collaborative revenue capture emerged as a firm-level approach to form an actionable partnership to open new revenue opportunities in the digital economy. Firstly, this served as a sense-maker to summarise a number of initiatives being trialled by journalism sites. As Hautakangas and Ahva (2018, p. 743) note, “new keywords are best understood as lenses through which the journalism profession and its practices can be re-examined.” It was also a way to explain emergent approaches to revenue generation by media organisations working together, and served as a starting point for discussions.

Conditions for inter-firm collaborations

It was helpful to categorise factors affecting collaboration in the areas of conduct, values, resources and operations (set out in Table 1) both as sources of success and tensions. Some were generic to any inter-relational working (such as trust, respect and understanding) while others were specific to cross-territorial working (need for a shared language, allowing for political and cultural differences). Participants identified the need for shared goals, and funding commitments. Several examples of successful collaborations were shared during plenary discussions. These varied from personal relationships such as marriages to creating technical global norms, co-writing industry reports or working with other partner organisations to coordinate a strategy to deliver support to journalists. Knowledge sharing around revenue generation and access to seed or grant money were cited as good starting points for collaboration.

Challenges included having unblocked internet provision, unavailable audience data sets from some regions, divergent supplies of in-country advertising, apathetic audiences, and exiled media competing against one another particularly for donor funding. Those relating to revenues included having incompatible partnerships or exclusive relationships with other media organisations, or divergent funding strategies. Regarding editorial practice, these covered the need for synergy across editorial values, agendas and content quality. The challenge of collaborating as a unified body of exiled or restricted media was articulated including practically (language, country-by-country differences) operationally (shared ethical and legal frames) and ideologically (finding a shared mission and vision).

Conceptual areas for collaboration

Four main conceptual areas for collaboration were then hypothesised: technology, revenue-based systems, coordinated actions and journalism production. Here, the focus was to explore possibilities, with the view of envisaging strategically useful long-term benefits from collaborative approaches to generate revenues (see Table 2). Five ideas were developed. Two involved *software-led technology* including aggregating and repurposing content in sub channels on different platforms. This allowed media providers to pool content and retain insights on behavioural data. The aim was penetration via proxy internet servers, extension of audiences in country and diaspora, filtering out poor content bounce rates and developing unique proprietary content. New revenues would be generated from selling behaviours to advertisers, new audiences from geotagging, and content production. Issues to overcome included content relevance to different geographic audiences and rights management. Plans for a shared data-insights platform for revenue generation were spearheaded by two participants, who extended their ideas beyond the atelier. A third proposal focussed on leveraging *distribution-led technology* that would be too expensive or prohibitive taken at the individual firm level, whether from satellite balloons, proximity broadcasting, sensor-based networks, new secret flows of news, or content in disposable places. The fourth focussed on the *revenue-led coordinating actions* through merchandise, events or products championing impact and freedom of expression. A large internationally supported fundraiser under an umbrella organisation was envisaged. The final idea proposed *payment-led revenue-based solutions*

Table 1. Conditions affecting collaborative approaches.

Success	Conduct	Values	Resources	Operations
	Listening	Shared aims and set norms	Good recruitment	Shared outcomes
	Respect	Value creep	No overlap in terms of expertise	Shared goals
	Agreed language for communication	Clarity on motivations	Diverse stakeholders	Shared timetable
	Face-to-face relations	A common objective or commitment to the cause	Strong leadership	Commitment to making money
	Hard working	Shared vision	Editorial supply chain enabling partner	Funding strategies
	Consistency	Respect	content distribution	
		Fun	Access to seed or capital funds	
		Freedom to fail	Peer to peer mentoring	
		Common goals	Access to business and market experts	
Tensions	Conduct	Values	Resources	Operations
	Everyday life	Success can prompt protectionist approaches	Lack of open unblocked internet	Exiled media competing with one another
	Language and culture barriers	Political differences	Finding other things to monetise such as language skills	Donor funding is a game to play
	Lack of trust and understanding	Diverse interests	Risk assessment	High set-up costs
		Different objectives	Often too political	Direct relationship advertising to media – needs to be aggregated or green washed
		Different editorial agendas and values	Unavailable data statistics in some countries such as Syria	An expectation of subsidy
		coherent value exchange for all parties	Lack of in-country advertising	Product needs to match the audience
		Political interests	Branding content	Disengaged or apathetic audiences, global
		Economic alliances internationally	Different agencies	reactive funding environment, far from the market
		Expectation of free content	Lack of time to think about revenues	Donor fatigue
		Theme fitting	Lack of skilled experts and knowledge	Diverse context with many different needs

Table 2. Conceptual inter-firm collaborations.

Technology	Revenue-based systems	Coordinating Actions	Journalism production
Software-led technology	Advertising-led solutions	Revenue-led	Service-oriented
Shared drone expertise	Advertising networks	Aggregated audience tools	Using open data services for reporting
<i>Content aggregation technology*</i>	Deals with mobile networking producers with revenue share for publishers	Find funds from new donors	Translation buttons
Geo-tagging content for use in maps and feeds	Content marketing referral site	Shared agency for training and consultancy	Crowd-sourced software for fact checking
Algorithms to promote fragile environment media	Ecommerce	Establish sector level data	Multiple language versioning
Encryption services	Advertising placement in an online umbrella network	<i>Merchandise sales*</i>	
	Collaborative affiliate deals	<i>Events*</i>	
Technology	Revenue-based systems	Coordinating Actions	Journalism production
Distribution-led technology	Payment-led solutions	Resource-led	Practice-led
Global or regional shared video platform such as YouTube	Micropayments	Meet-ups and knowledge exchange	Joined-up photography agency
<i>Content distribution via the Internet of Things*</i>	Online lead generation	Share and centralise IT, finance and sales support between a group	Centralised infrastructure for cheaper video production
Bluetooth beacons	Private payment environments	Create a formalised exiled media network	Virtual newsroom
Chat applications	Syndication		
Sensor base network distribution	Paywalls		
Live transmission	Donate function with revenue allocated proportionally		
Syndicated wire service	Partnerships with social networks	Attract global expertise	
Pooled data dashboard	<i>SMS donations*</i>	Working with existing shared content platforms	
Create a dark web	Licensing	Back-end administration to stream content submission via content management system	
Anonymous audience and protection tools	<i>Mobile payment systems*</i>		
Proxy servers akin to a hotspot shield	Shared membership models		
	Bespoke crowdfunding platform		

**Expanded hypotheses.*

closed-network payment services and non-monetary exchange transactions to support donations and other revenues to exiled and restricted media. Content would be provided for free, triggering an acknowledgement via SMS triggering a micro-payment opportunity to express support. The specific challenge here was technical faced with government control of the mobile network.

Discussion

Faced with internal and external barriers, the assessment of economic operations at the time of investigation fits with previous scholarly work indicating capacity for income generation to be weak, due to limited resources and business knowledge, remote teams and weak distribution, poor purchasing power of audiences and limited viable advertising revenues. Co-existing economic orientations existed amongst exiled and politically pressured media. While one was open to the idea that journalism can still “earn” money because “revenue generation is not a dirty word”, the other underlined the need to be free from economic pressures and requiring donor funding. The former orientation approached revenue diversification with potential and highlighted an interest in alternative funding sources. The participatory mode of inquiry at least in part motivated some participants to seek “business models not donor models”. Moves away from donor dependency would certainly be hard won. The latter justified donor interventions due to the content: often heavy on politics and corruption, but light on topics that create broader audiences and increased engagement. Such views fit with broader assessments on interventionist funding of non-profit journalism as a public good (Konieczna, 2018). The idealised notion of an apolitical landscape of support does not stand and media navigate this landscape in their attempts to secure financial survival. These further illuminate the complexities surrounding grant support.

Such diverse assessments of operational revenue conditions would have been beyond the outputs of more orthodox qualitative approaches. Practitioners were re-orientated on their shared practical daily challenges and deeper understanding of revenue opportunities as it “raised awareness of the challenges exiled media face above the obvious security ones”. This included thinking differently about in-country and out-of-country audiences. In resolving or renegotiating different perceptions, participants developed a deeper understanding of the economic situation they faced, and how it might be improved. Frank, transparent and anecdotal sharing in this way can move the sector forward. This fits with research elsewhere in authoritarian regimes which found a management culture that values collaborative reflection, ethical practice, and editorial innovation helping to embed lasting professional relationships and codes of conduct (Sakr, 2016).

Defining collaborative revenue capture was challenging and the atelier therefore added a cognitive dimension. Collaborative revenue capture was co-defined as a firm-level approach to form an actionable partnership to open new revenue opportunities in the digital economy. Collaboration as a term was particularly loaded with connotations particularly in this context as it was associated with government collaboration for illicit gain, working with government spies or colluding with authorities. The atelier stopped

short of challenging the terms, and seeking alternatives such as revenue creation instead of capture. The term capture has been more recently popularised in reference to media capture and may therefore be easily confused.

The relevance of symbiosis here was to understand how politically pressured news media could overcome their resource constraints, to reduce external threats and uncertainty, and to achieve long-term cooperation and some stability through inter-firm organising. There was general motivation that working together was possible grounded in “a real desire and potential to innovate in this space”. Commonalities were born not in their situation as exiled or politically pressured but in the kinds of values and shared struggles being faced with an “unequivocally ameliorative impulse” (West, 1989, p. 4). We can say that there was an appetite for horizontal approaches which preserve niche and independence while offering strength and resilience. These focussed on leveraging skills and motivations from participating media, as workable exploratory options. The conditions for collaborative approaches were most favourable where interdependence offered editorial, practical and commercial opportunities for mutual support. Success depended as much on conduct and shared values as it did on resources and operational considerations. Participants showed willing to collaborate in a way not seen typically by corporately owned mainstream news. The findings build on earlier literature (Cook, 2016; Sakr, 2016) to identify how stronger foundations for sustainability can be created among media teams, as well as with readers and advertisers as we know little about how to assess the quality of collaboration as an inter-firm dynamic and the merits of collaborative structures for politically pressured news media.

Collaboration was not embraced straightforwardly as a guiding notion. Many reflections during the workshop were critical or doubtful. Fitting with coopetition literature, these experiences reflect an increasing awareness of the complexity of conditions between economic agents. These were heightened for politically pressured news media operating in multiple languages, inconsistent availability of audience data and patchy internet access. The diverse contexts and varied pressures present barriers. What happens through the paradox of the simultaneous pursuit of competition and cooperation includes felt tension (Gnyawali et al., 2016) raising pertinent challenges for those working in media development. While the partners in this type of alliances have cooperation among them, they also compete for some common resources that they all need, such as the same market or the same supply, not least for donor funding. As a regional network to promote solidarity in South Africa also found, cooperation needs clear goals and a decentralised structure that avoids imposing hierarchy to encourage unhealthy competition (Wasserman, 2021).

The four main conceptual areas for collaboration were grouped into technology, revenue-based systems, coordinating actions and journalism production. In fact, participants were encouraged to be exploratory as to where and with whom collaborations may emerge. Specifically, participants noted learning about possibilities in the post-Soviet space, potential new partners, cross-border collaboration “that could generate revenues”. Digital technologies offered clear routes to facilitate such collaborations. Many collaborative ideas were real-world feasible projects that could take shape in an everyday context. Content aggregation, geo-tagging, digital encryption and algorithms presented rich terrains for inter-firm collaborations. There was striking variety and ambition in these imagined future projects. These were particularly illuminating as

increased digital and global connectivity are beginning to challenge exile as a concept. The conceptual collaborations were not intended as a systematic typology; this would be better achieved with methodologies better suited to mapping and would be a worthy addition to the literature. Rather, the opportunities pose a powerful argument about the centrality of collaboration in journalism's economic viability in the digital economy: particularly in a time of increased globalisation and the survival of small- to medium-sized news media.

These non-linear discussions may not be very helpful in emerging concrete or quick fix knowledge nor are there opportunities to derive extensive follow-up research as the atelier was context specific. While fruitful and meaningful discussions can be generated during intensive episodes of exchange such as this, the risk is that intentions succumb to an action cliff post-event. The scope of collaborative initiatives will also remain limited without levels of coordination or management. This included the desire for a forum for regular contact and exchange, or to seek project funding. The absence of a coordinating or representative body limit the real-world adoption of proposals. Thus, there are implications for media development actors to support or facilitate the necessary coordination activities needed to unlock collaborative approaches that could strengthen fragile media. As feedback indicated, "ideas are great, but you need action to make a difference". Organisations such as United for News or Global Forum for Media Development would be well placed to take further steps. This echoes findings from Schiffrin (2019) who calls for an industry-wide body that would assist small civic-minded outlets in building capacity for doing international fundraising, channel funds from donors and other kinds of efforts to generate revenue with peer-to-peer learning and fundraising.

While these conclusions add to the current knowledge about economic experiences, they also propose new directions for future research into journalism sustainability more generally. A fitting next step would be to systematically review and critique collaborative approaches to revenue creation. These would be timely given the industry-led practices of collaboration amongst small- to medium- sized news media, and particularly pertinent helping to avoid exiled and politically pressured news media having to fight the sustainability battle as a singular challenge.

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