Measuring the Business Side: Indicators to Assess Media Viability

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Executive Summary

In times of digital transformation media all over the world have to come up with new ways to ensure their survival. Meanwhile, media development actors are searching for new concepts and orientation in their support of media organizations and media markets. This paper presents DW Akademie's suggestion for new indicators to measure economic viability. The criteria not only take into account the financial strategies and managerial structures of individual media outlets, but also the overall economic conditions in a country as well as the structures of the media market needed to ensure independence, pluralism and professional standards. After all, money talks – and media development should listen.

Media Viability Indicators: A UNESCO and DW Akademie initiative

Creativity is high among media houses experimenting with new revenue sources, and so is desperation: running cyber cafés, organizing events, offering IT and production services, and fresh produce from the small farm next door to the studio, and even the renowned New York Times has turned to selling wine. In an era of rapid technological developments and new, digital realities, traditional business models for news media are under strain.

Media development actors need to take this problem seriously. In order to effectively enhance media viability and meet the specific requirements of the digital age, they need to be able to thoroughly analyze and understand the complex challenges facing media worldwide in their attempt to be financially strong enough to survive in the long-term, *and* produce independent, high-quality journalism.

Although media viability is such a pressing and much discussed topic, there have not been sufficient efforts to comprehensively evaluate – and thereby better understand and actively pursue – this complex issue. The international community of media development actors and freedom of expression NGOs pride themselves on elaborate systems for media monitoring and the assessment of media landscapes. And yet, there is a major gap in the existing initiatives that assess the conditions of a country's media system, such as the rankings and indices by Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, IREX, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. They do not, or only marginally, consider the business side of media. And even UNESCO's comprehensive Media Development Indicators (MDIs), consisting of 50 key indicators and 190 sub-indicators, lack criteria dealing with media viability.

This is why DW Akademie and UNESCO initiated a joint project, titled "Enhancing Knowledge to Support Sustainable Media"[1], aimed at reinforcing the business side of media development. The initiative's main objective was to develop a set of indicators addressing media viability. These new Media Viability Indicators are to serve as an amendment to UNESCO's current MDI framework, being integrated herein as a sixth category of indicators[2]. In order to develop the

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[1] *The project was funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in 2014.*

[2] *In 2013, UNESCO already extended the thematical scope of the MDIs by introducing indicators on journalists' safety on the national (UNESCO, 2013) and international (UNESCO, 2013a) level. However, the Journalists' Safety Indicators are separate from the MDIs: While they are based on the framework, i.e. have a similar structure and style, they are not integrated in the MDIs as an additional category.*

Media Viability Indicators, both UNESCO and DW Akademie elaborated a draft set of criteria[3].

This paper presents and discusses DW Akademie's suggestion for indicators to measure the economic viability of a pluralistic and diverse media sector. Its aim is to advance the discussion and practical work on media viability by presenting a diverse and yet distinct set of relevant criteria. This conceptual resource, although still a work-in-progress, may already serve to analyze media landscapes and support the development of viability-related strategies on different levels.

Why is a thorough knowledge of media viability so important?

A concept as multi-dimensional as media viability is difficult to assess. Hence, its thorough analysis has largely been neglected in the field of media development until now. However, having a profound understanding of the situation of media viability in a country is crucially important mainly for two reasons:

1. **From the perspective of media practitioners:** Only if media outlets are aware of the detailed conditions and existing shortcomings of the environment they are operating in, can they act accordingly and find ways to strengthen their sustainability. This is particularly important in the very complex digital context.
2. **From the perspective of media development and media policy:** It is essential to have thorough information on the situation of media viability in a country or region in order to develop adequate strategies and project designs. Moreover, gathering data about the economic sustainability of media helps to monitor the situation of a media landscape, track its development, and raise awareness of the existing problems.

The knowledge obtained through assessing indicators focusing on media viability also helps to identify potential sustainable business models for news outlets in the respective national context. This is not only highly relevant for media owners and managers around the world, but also for international donors and implementers involved in media development. Only if business viability is ensured, can media outlets – which might currently be supported by external donors – become, or remain, economically sustainable and editorially independent in the long term.

Current Status of the Media Viability Indicators

For the development of the new indicators the basic prerequisites of globally applicable measurements had to be taken into account (see Appendix 1). This particularly includes the need for the indicators to be assessable as well as considering the practical implications of cost and time for collecting the relevant data. In addition, due to the aim of integrating the Media Viability Indicators into the existing MDI framework, certain specific requirements had to be considered. This was to make sure that the new indicators match the MDIs regarding content, style, and application, among other things.

In spring 2015, UNESCO published the new Draft Indicators for Media Viability (UNESCO, 2015). They consist of a 'lite' version that will be integrated into the existing MDI framework, and a more elaborate and detailed version, which enables comprehensive stand-alone studies on media viability.
The indicators are based on a first draft prepared for the organization by Prof. Robert Picard from the University of Oxford as well as a set of indicators suggested by DW Akademie, which is presented here. They have already been commented upon by numerous international experts: The draft indicators were discussed at a regional conference on media sustainability in Montevideo in December 2014, attended by 25 media experts from Latin America. Moreover, the set of criteria has been submitted to an online international consultation process involving 58 media professionals and media monitoring experts from all regions as well as relevant international and regional organizations for their consideration and feedback. Currently, it is intended to pilot the Draft Indicators for Media Viability in selected countries in order to further refine and adapt them, as well as to help relevant actors to gather detailed information needed to develop appropriate responses that promote media viability as an important pillar of media development.

The latest version of the indicators published by UNESCO is divided into seven thematic areas ("issues"), and consists of seven key indicators and 42 sub-indicators. DW Akademie's suggestion is more compact, comprising of six key indicators and 28 sub-indicators, grouped into three thematic dimensions. This set of indicators will be presented in the following. 24 of the 28 sub-indicators suggested by DW Akademie are included in the revised and published Draft Indicators for Media Viability[4].

[3] *UNESCO commissioned Robert G. Picard from the University of Oxford to develop draft indicators.*

[4] *This draft consists of seven thematic areas, each including one key indicator only. This is a discrepancy from the structure of the established MDI framework, in which each area comprises several key indicators.*

DW Akademie's suggestion for an extended MDI framework

DW Akademie's understanding of media viability does not only include financial sustainability, i.e. economic survival, but also the ability of media outlets to produce high quality journalism in the long term. This means that the economic, social, and political conditions in a country must provide a supportive environment for the emergence, development, and continuance of media companies providing relevant content that informs the public, holds power to account and enables participation and dialogue. Moreover, the enterprises themselves must act in ways that promote their sustainability. For this reason, DW Akademie divided its Media Viability Indicators into thematic dimensions representing the three levels of a media landscape. With regard to media viability these are:

1. **Macro level:** the overall economic environment in a country (systemic)
2. **Meso level:** structure of the media market and revenue sources (media industry)
3. **Micro level:** media organizations' resources and structures (individual media outlets)

Because of significant national differences between countries, sustainability issues vary for large and small states, commercial, state, and community/non-commercial media, dominant and minority languages, large and small-scale media operations, and established and emerging, i.e. start-up media. While all media face financial and management challenges, the nature and scale of the issues vary and some face difficulties others do not because of these fundamental differences. The indicators suggested by DW Akademie aim to take into account the full range of different scenarios and conditions, which explains their in part very detailed nature.

The Media Viability Indicators presented here focus exclusively on economic, financial, and business aspects, since – as mentioned above – some issues related to media sustainability are already covered in the existing MDIs. (see box below)

In conformity with the existing MDI framework, the proposed new and sixth category (hence the counting of the key indicators) focusing on media viability is titled:

Category 6: Financial capacity is sufficient to ensure economically sustainable independent and pluralistic media

This, as the description of the indicators will show, includes the economic, business and managerial resources and capacity of media outlets in a country. The title further indicates that the emphasis is not only on economic survival, but also on media's ability to be independent and pluralistic.

Existing MDI indicators dealing with issues related to media viability

MDI Indicator 2.9: State uses taxation and business regulation to encourage media development in a non-discriminatory manner
- Preferential tax, import duty and tariff regimes to encourage the development of broadcasting and print media
- State does not impose prohibitive taxes or levies on media organizations
- State tax policy and practice does not discriminateagainst the media nor favor specific private media outlets over others

MDI Indicator 2.10: State does not discriminate through advertising policy
- State places advertising in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner e.g. through a code of conduct
- Allocation of government advertising is strictly monitored to ensure fair access by all media
- Public service broadcasters are subject to fair competition rules in respect of advertising they carry
- Codes of conduct or other guidelines for the allocation of state-funded advertising implementation

MDI Indicator 2.11: Effective regulation governing advertising in the media
- Broadcasters and print media adhere to nationally-or regionally-agreed limits on advertising content, where applicable
- Broadcasters and print media adhere to nationally- or regionally-agreed guidelines for the separation of advertising and programming, where applicable
- Existence of a code of advertising, established by an independent professional body, to prevent misleading advertising

Economic Challenges: Creating a supportive market environment for media

The first thematic dimension tackles the macro and meso level of media viability: **the overall economic environment and media market structure.** In order to ensure viability, the broader economic conditions must support the financial sustainability of media outlets by providing them with conditions that strengthen their viability. Moreover, media audiences have to be wealthy enough, i.e. their general purchasing power and ability to buy media products have to be sufficient to support media's sustainability. Furthermore, media at all levels – local, regional and national – can only be viable if regulations are in place ensuring that they can operate within rules for fair competition.

In addition to the overall economic environment, the structure of the media market must support media viability. That means that national, regional and local media – including alternative and digital media as well as media in different (minority) languages – have to be able to attract large enough audiences to be financially viable. Moreover, cooperation agreements and joint ventures between media, tackling prices for news agencies and selling advertising space for instance, should set fair rules for all kinds of media. Consequently, in accordance with the MDI style, DW Akademie suggests the following two key indicators and six sub-indicators for this thematic dimension, plus several means of verification for each key indicator:

A Overall economic environment and media market structure

Indicator 6.1	Indicator 6.2
The overall economic environment supports the economic sustainability of media organizations – The overall economy provides media organizations with an environment that reinforces their economic sustainability – Media audiences are wealthy enough to enable media to be economically sustainable (general purchasing power and ability to buy media products) – Regulations enable media at all levels to operate within rules for fair competition	**The media market structure supports the economic sustainability of media organizations** – Media at all levels – national, regional and local – are able to attract large enough audiences to be financially viable – Media in different languages, including minority languages, are able to attract large enough audiences to be financially viable – Cooperation agreements and joint ventures between media organizations set fair rules for media at all levels (e.g. prices for news agencies, selling advertising space)
Means of verification – Data of credible agencies or consulting firms on the overall health of the economy, e.g. income levels, national unemployment rates, Gross Domestic Product per capita – Data on media production and import/export – Laws which clearly disadvantage smaller media companies – Documented cases of anti-competitive rulings against small media companies	**Means of verification** – Reports of credible agencies or consulting firms on market concentration levels in media sectors – Data on multilingualism and the population, literacy and income rates within language groups – Reports from audience measurement firms or researchers about distribution of audiences across media outlets and products – Reports from media professional associations – Documented cases of collusive behavior among large media companies

Business challenges: Finding diverse and fair sources of revenue for media

The second thematic dimension addresses both the meso (media industry) and micro level of media viability, namely the **revenue sources of media organizations**. For economically sustainable independent and pluralistic media to exist the private advertising market has to be sufficiently strong. This means that there should be enough local and regional advertising available to reinforce the sustainability of local and regional media outlets. Moreover, in order to strengthen independence and financial security media organizations must not be overly dependent on a small number of advertising clients only. An independent and accountable advertising council or other body that sets standards for advertising practices should further support media organizations' viability.

Moreover, to ensure sustainability the revenue sources of media must be diversified and used in a non-discriminatory manner. That is to say that media outlets should not depend on one single source of capital, but receive revenue from a multitude of sources in order to strengthen both economic and editorial independence. Moreover, in many countries of the world the distribution of subsidies, especially by the state, distorts the market and competition. Therefore, a fair and transparent distribution of both state and non-state subsidies plays an important role for media viability – and should be overseen by an independent body. On the same note, the sources of these subsidies must not explicitly constrain editorial independence and/or political neutrality. Furthermore, especially in times of digital transformation and thereby new emerging business models, media organizations should develop alternative sources of revenue beyond advertising, government subsidies, and direct sales.

Accordingly, following the logic of the MDI framework, DW Akademie suggests the following two key indicators and eight sub-indicators for this thematic group, plus several means of verification for each key indicator.

B Revenue sources of media organizations

Indicator 6.3
The private advertising market is strong enough to support the economic sustainability of media

- There is enough local and regional advertising available to support strong local and regional media organizations
- Media organizations are not overly dependent on a small number of advertising clients
- An independent and accountable advertising council or other body that sets standards for advertising practices reinforces the economic sustainability of media organizations

Means of verification

- Reports from credible agencies and consulting firms on advertising activity at the local, regional, and national levels
- Reports from advertising professional associations about trends in local, regional and national advertising markets
- Reports from professional media associations about the health of local, regional and national advertising markets
- Observations on advertising volume and distribution within media

Indicator 6.4
The revenue sources of media are diversified and used in a non-discriminatory manner

- Media organizations do not depend on one single source of capital but receive revenue from a multitude of sources
- The distribution of state and non-state subsidies is fair and transparent
- An independent body oversees the distribution of state and non-state subsidies
- Sources of state and non-state subsidies do not explicitly constrain editorial independence and political neutrality
- Media are developing alternative sources of revenue beyond direct sales, advertising and government subsidies

Means of verification

- Reports from credible agencies or consulting firms about the role of subsidies in media finance, the sources of subsidies used by media, and the impact of those subsidies on editorial quality and independence
- Reports from professional media associations about the different sources of revenue being used by media companies
- The existence of laws or processes for media subsidies that are not transparent
- The existence of laws on media subsidies that clearly are unfair to certain types or groups of media
- Documented cases of unfair distribution of subsidies
- Documented cases in which subsidies from state or non-state actors have compromised editorial independence

C Media organizations' resources and structures supportive of economic sustainability

Indicator 6.5
Media organizations have access to sufficient resources for efficient business operation

- Media at all levels are able to generate enough financial resources to survive
- Media at all levels generate enough financial resources to provide audiences with high-quality news reporting and production
- Media organizations pay journalists high enough wages to attract and retain qualified employees
- Media organizations pay journalists high enough wages to discourage journalistically unethical behavior
- Media have access to sufficient knowledge resources, i.e. are able to find and hire staff, including women and marginalized groups, with sufficient knowledge and skills in the different areas (management, marketing, sales etc.)
- The employees in advertising and sales, including women and marginalized groups, have received vocational or academic training
- The employees in advertising and sales, including women and marginalized groups, are organized in professional associations and unions
- Media have sufficient and affordable access to necessary tangible resources such as electricity, newsprint, production equipment, distribution systems etc.

Means of verification

- Reports from credible agencies or consulting firms about the financial commitment media are able to make to producing high-quality journalism
- Reports from professional associations for journalists and media professionals about wage levels among journalists and media professionals and about the impact of the available labor pool and wage rates on media quality and media ethics.
- Reports from credible agencies or documented shortages of key inputs and resources in media production
- Reports from credible agencies about the prices of key inputs and resources in media production

Indicator 6.6
Media organizations have the necessary organizational structures and routines to ensure economic sustainability

- Media organizations have an organizational entity (a department or at least one person in charge) that dedicates most of its working time to the generation of revenue
- The marketing and sales department works separately from journalists and enables them to focus on content and journalistic quality
- Media organizations have regular access to market and audience research data that allow them to define their audiences and include that in their strategy
- Media organizations have a sound business and finance plan that employees are familiar with and able to implement
- Media organizations have a written document that specifies the general terms and conditions/advertising policy that ensures independence of editorial content from advertiser influence
- Media organizations use standard procedures and documents (price lists, written contracts etc.) to gain revenue

Means of verification

- Reports from media professional associations
- Reports from credible agencies and media consulting firms
- Research conducted by credible scholars or research agencies

Organizational challenges: Managing media outlets effectively

The third thematic dimension deals exclusively with the micro level of media viability, i.e. aspects related to individual media outlets: **media organizations' resources and structures.** In addition to supportive conditions concerning the overall economic environment as well as the media market, it is essential for media viability that media companies have access to sufficient resources for efficient and sustainable business operation. This not only means that media outlets should overall be able to generate enough financial resources to survive, but also that these resources are sufficient to provide audiences with high-quality news reporting and production. This includes paying staff high enough wages to attract and retain qualified employees, and to discourage journalistically unethical behavior. Another prerequisite for viable media is that they are able to find and hire staff with sufficient knowledge in the relevant areas such as management, marketing and sales. On a more general level, media outlets must also have sufficient and affordable access to essential tangible resources such as electricity, newsprint, production equipment, and distribution systems.

Moreover, media organizations need the fundamental organizational structures and routines in order to ensure their viability. This includes having an organizational entity – a department or at least one person in charge – that dedicates most of its working time to the generation of revenue. For the sake of editorial independence, this marketing and sales department should work separately from journalists and thus enable them to focus on content and journalistic quality. Furthermore, media outlets can only develop a sustainable business strategy when they have regular access to market and audience research data, which allow them to define their audiences. A vital part of this strategy is a sound business and finance plan that employees are familiar with and able to implement. In this context, it is important that media companies have a written document that specifies the general terms and conditions/advertising policy that ensures independence of editorial content from the influence of advertisers or other revenue sources. Generally, every media outlet should use standard procedures and documents to gain revenue, such as price lists and written contracts.

Therefore, in accordance with the existing MDIs, DW Akademie suggests two key indicators and 14 sub-indicators for this thematic group, plus several means of verification for each key indicator, see chart C above.

Conclusions

Embracing both the economic survival of media and their ability to produce independent, high-quality news content, media viability is a fundamentally important – and at the same time often neglected – area of media development. Especially in this time of digital transformation, a profound knowledge about this complex issue is crucial in order to reinforce the sustainability of all types of media around the world. This is true for media owners and journalists worldwide as much as for international donors and implementers involved in media development. Being able to measure media viability around the world will enhance the knowledge and debate in this field, and thereby contribute to improving the conditions and strategies in the future.

It will be a big step for the media development world when UNESCO finalizes the new sixth category of the MDI framework and thereby incorporates the topic of media viability in the assessment of media landscapes to the extent that it deserves. In order to ensure a smooth integration of the new indicators into the MDIs, DW Akademie recommends adapting the structure of the latest version of media viability indicators, summarizing and thus reducing the number of thematic dimensions. As a next step a pilot study is needed to measure these indicators and to prove the case for this new set of variables.

Overall, DW Akademie believes that the indicators presented here are an adequate tool to gather sorely needed information about the situation of media viability in any given country, but with a special focus on developing countries. The proposed criteria are operational and applicable, both within the MDIs and as an individual assessment. In order to make optimal use of them, they should be applied and thereby contribute to promoting media viability as an essential aspect of media development.

Indeed, the main problem with media viability is that there are no general, one-fits-all solutions. There is no simple answer to the questions on how independent media can survive and create revenue and a stable income for those nvolved. Certainly, there are individual cases of successful business models. But these cannot be transferred directly to other circumstances. And surely there are many more cases of compromise, false bargains and loss of independence. However, this should not stop us from analyzing the complexity and different aspects of media viability. On the contrary, the challenges should encourage us: The better we all understand the problem in all its dimensions, the more likely we are to flexibly advance possible solutions.

DW Akademie's suggestion for Media Viability Indicators within the MDIs

Category 6: Financial capacity is sufficient to ensure economically sustainable independent and pluralistic media

A Overall economic environment and media market structure

6.1: The overall economic environment supports the economic sustainability of media organizations	**6.2: The media market structure supports the economic sustainability of media organizations**
The overall economy provides media organizations with an environment that reinforces their economic sustainability	Media at all levels – national, regional and local – are able to attract large enough audiences to be financially viable
Media audiences are wealthy enough to enable media to be economically sustainable (general purchasing power and ability to buy media products)	Media in different languages, including minority languages, are able to attract large enough audiences to be financially viable
Regulations enable media at all levels to operate within rules for fair competition	Cooperation agreements and joint ventures between media organizations set fair rules for media at all levels (e.g. prices for news agencies, selling advertising space)

B Revenue sources of media organizations

6.3: The private advertising market is strong enough to support the economic sustainability of media	**6.4: The revenue sources of media are diversified and used in a non-discriminatory manner**
There is enough local and regional advertising available to support strong local and regional media organizations	Media organizations do not depend on one single source of capital but receive revenue from a multitude of sources
Media organizations are not overly dependent on a small number of advertising clients	The distribution of state and non-state subsidies is fair and transparent
An independent and accountable advertising council or other body that sets standards for advertising practices reinforces the economic sustainability of media organizations	An independent body oversees the distribution of state and non-state subsidies

C Media organizations' resources and structures supportive of economic sustainability

6.5: Media organizations have access to sufficient resources for efficient business operation	**6.6: Media organizations have the necessary organizational structures and routines to ensure economic sustainability**
Media at all levels are able to generate enough financial resources to survive	Media organizations have an organizational entity (a department or at least one person in charge) that dedicates most of its working time to the generation of revenue
Media at all levels generate enough financial resources to provide audiences with high-quality news reporting and production	The marketing and sales department works separately from journalists and enables them to focus on content and journalistic quality
Media organizations pay journalists high enough wages to attract and retain qualified employees	Media organizations have regular access to market and audience research data that allow them to define their audiences and include that in their strategy

Appendix 1: Particular requirements for the development of the Media Viability Indicators

The following particular requirements had to be taken into account in the process of developing the new criteria, and thus shape the indicators' nature:

Content: First of all, in order to avoid repetitions and overlap with issues already covered in the MDIs, the Media Viability Indicators have to focus specifically on the business aspect of sustainability as opposed to a wider concept, which would include aspects such as the existence of an enabling legal environment or the overall professionalism of journalists. These aspects are already addressed in other parts of the MDIs. To assess the business aspect of viability, various criteria on different economic levels have to be considered.

Characteristics/Style: The main characteristics of the Media Viability Indicators – i.e. structure, form, and wording – should follow the same approach used for the other five categories of the MDI framework. Each MDI category is made up of several key indicators (numbered 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 etc. for the first category), which are broken down into numerous sub-indicators. These sub-indicators provide an indication of the aspects to consider when addressing each key indicator. The indicators are grouped into thematic areas, the so-called "issues" (corresponding to A, B, C etc. in each category). Additionally, various means of verification are suggested for each key indicator.

Accordingly, the indicators for media viability should consist of around six key indicators, broken down into sub-indicators, grouped into thematic issues, and suggesting means of verification. Moreover, it is important to follow the linguistic style of the existing MDIs.

Application: In order to be able to integrate the Media Viability Indicators into the MDIs, they should be applicable with the methods used to assess the framework's other indicators as well. Typically, a research team consisting of both international and local researchers evaluates all key indicators using various methods including desk research (analysis of laws, policies, reports, and survey) as well as field research (interviews, regional and thematic focus groups, consultative events, surveys, and media content analysis). It is intended that the new indicators for media viability provide a tool that can be used to evaluate the situation in a country either within a complete MDI assessment, or as an independent measure focusing on the economic sustainability of media only.

Scope/Sensitivity: The Media Viability Indicators should take into account all different kinds of media (TV, radio, print, online) as well as media of all sizes and scopes: national, regional and local. Furthermore, when relevant, the criteria should be disaggregated by population characteristics, considering especially vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities and people speaking minority languages. Moreover, it should be ensured that the indicators are gender-sensitive, i.e. giving special attention to the situation of women.

(Western) bias: The indicators for media viability should be as unbiased as possible, taking into account the full range of possible business models and revenue sources for media that may exist in countries around the world. To avoid any Western bias, the whole spectrum of possible challenges regarding media viability should be considered in the indicators, focusing particularly on developing countries and countries in transition. Typically, the majority of MDI projects are implemented in these countries.

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