

PUBLIC FUNDING FOR PRIVATE MEDIA IN THE MENA REGION

By Sarah Zaarour

1. Introduction

Under international law, states are required to create an enabling legal and regulatory environment that supports a free, diverse and pluralistic media sector. Financial support provided by public authorities to private media organisations can help protect and promote pluralism and diversity in the media, provided that effective safeguards are put in place to prevent governments from interfering in editorial policy and independence.

Challenges posed by media globalisation and digitisation combined with falling audiences and advertising revenues are the key reasons behind the creation of public funding schemes to support the press in the MENA region. Monolithic media landscapes and poor journalistic content has driven the public away, with

2.2.3. Size of funding

aspect and calls to impose stricter regulations on establishing new media (most of which are likely to come from within the media sector) should be resisted.

In-depth research and analysis of the state of the media as well as anticipating professional and technological developments and citizens' needs are preconditions to establishing an effective media support fund. The classical policy planning mistake is to favour and enforce the status quo rather than to work towards a brighter future.

Commissioned for the National Media Viability and Investment Conference
Sierra Leone, April 2022



new 15 community radio stations which were established in 2019 but have yet to start operating as they wait for international funds to arrive.

The public advertising fund is an important scheme, but the government lacks the will and resources to launch it anytime soon. This has given rise to false hopes and has caused much frustration in the private media sector.

Much of the international funding for the Tunisian media sector since 2011 has lacked vision and coordination. Significant resources have been spent on unnecessary media development programmes with high management fees. With the benefit of hindsight, these funds could have been used more effectively.

Community and regional radio stations offer an important service to local communities and specific identity groups. But with no other opportunities for financial assistance beyond the funds managed by HAICA, they are in danger of disappearing. Funding to support their core operations and content production should be significantly increased.

Ongoing discussions between Tunisian media representative groups and the OTDAV are a sign of maturity, and potentially a source of sustainable income for the media sector. Initiatives from the HAICA and other national actors to develop specific funds should be pursued.

newspapers stopped appearing for more than a month, after a paper shortage forced them off the stands.

In 2021, a Covid-19 emergency package for the media sector excluded the private press, with no reasons offered by the authorities as to why only state-owned outlets would benefit. This created further discontent in the sector.

On the other hand, the fund to support the press continued to operate and the Covid-19 emergency package included an 85% subsidy of printi

the media³⁸. The Committee itself includes one representative from the HAPA and two from the government. Strong criticism of the way in which the funds are distributed has been voiced in recent years³⁹. Critics say the government should not be allowed to sit on a committee that determines which media will receive support – decisions that should rest with the profession and independent bodies.

Observers say the fund spreads itself too thin, supporting the proliferation of newspapers and news websites. The number of organisations supported in 2020 (312) was more than double

funding, as a result, **only** helps media to pay urgent bills, not to invest or plan for the future.

In addition, 30% of the state subsidy goes directly to the state-owned Imprimerie Nationale where all the newspapers are printed. This directly undermines the independence of media outlets and their ability to criticise the government.

Recognising the structural weakness of the media sector in Mauritania, a National Commission for Media Reform was appointed in 2020 by President Mohamed Ould El-Ghazaouani. It delivered a report in 2021 with 64 recommendations, including increasing financial support for the media sector and ensuring the stability of the fund. Other recommendations covered the regulation of the digital media sector; reforming state-owned media into

backbone of the private media sector in Palestine. In addition to the national public broadcaster, the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), there are three national TV stations affiliated to political parties. However, the most watched TV channels

platforms and to use the revenue to support local media.

sector as a whole, but for a few privileged outlets. This, observers say, is an effective way of weakening and controlling the press.

The absence of associations representing private media employers means that stakeholders lack leverage in their negotiations with the government to reform regulations and offer fair and transparent access to public funds for the media.

Despite the economic situation in Jordan, advertising and legal announcements generate high revenues. Establishing mechanisms that can ensure fair distribution to private and community media should have a positive impact on media sustainability and quality, and help involve local communities in the national discourse.

APRIL 2022