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Measuring Beyond Money: The Media Viability Indicators (MVIs)

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This paper presents a new set of indicators to assess the viability of news media at a time when the discussion about the survival of quality media is omnipresent, while systematic, fact-based strategies to tackle the problem are omni-absent. As digital transformation is sweeping through the media industry, marking the death knell of traditional business models, new answers are needed. Based on its Media Viability Model, DW Akademie has developed a framework that allows media managers, media development experts, and academics to assess individual media outlets or entire information ecosystems in a practical, solution-oriented, and tailor-made way. The Media Viability Indicators (MVIs) look at five societal dimensions that influence the functioning and quality of news media: economics, politics, content and expertise, technology, and the community they are serving. They allow for gathering data and evidence sorely needed for more effective and substantiated strategies. The MVIs also aim to develop a common language about what media viability actually means and enhance the discussion on what needs to be taken into account when talking about the future of news media.

Let's start with a daring hypothesis: Market failure is to the media sector what climate change is to politics. The topic is omnipresent; it is overwhelmingly complex and at the same time life-threatening—to our democracies, our economies but also to individual journalists who lose their jobs; it affects the Global North as much as the Global South; the majority of people recognize that there is a big problem—and yet very few have consensual strategies to tackle this collective challenge. But in one crucial respect the climate debate is far ahead of the media viability debate: There are feasible and commonly accepted parameters and methods to assess the climate situation—such as carbon dioxide concentrations, ocean acidification, temperature, precipitation, or sea levels. Thanks to these data, a more informed discussion based on facts is possible, leading to stronger arguments and more effective advocacy (see for example Greta Thunberg's narrative). This concrete information based on systematic assessments has played an intrinsic part in raising global awareness and creating a common language on the issues at stake. It has also led to more substantiated and effective strategies to tackle this major challenge, which can only be overcome when all stakeholders join forces and work towards the same goal.

Up to now, the discussion around media viability misses just that. Accurate data on the viability of entire media systems as well as information on individual media outlets are sorely needed so that accurate models can be developed and tested, and strategies for action can be advanced. Only then can the current situation for quality news media around the world be improved.

The challenge of media viability

So far, there is no common language among media and media development stakeholders to describe the complex challenge of media viability: 'media sustainability,' 'financial sustainability,' 'business viability,' or 'economic sustainability' of the media are just some of the labels being used.

As suggested by these terms, many media outlets and media development strategies have solely focused on the financial aspect of news media viability—testing paywalls, membership models, or support from donors, concentrating on individual, innovative business models. However, this approach often ignores other significant areas that influence the functioning and quality of news media, such as the overall political, legal, and economic context in which news media operate. It also ignores the question of the quality of the content that is being produced and how it is being published; whether news organizations not only survive but do so with the resources to serve as watchdogs of government, business, and society. Moreover, it is essential to look at the way the audience, or citizens in general, perceive and use news media and what technological possibilities they have to access media content.

Because innovative business models will not save the day when there is restrictive legislation on public access to information and freedom of expression. Diverse revenue streams can only last so long when journalistic content does not reach audiences due to dilapidated technological infrastructure or because the way information is presented does not attract a big enough audience. Self-censorship by journalists due to threats and/or attacks will not stop even when they receive their salaries each month. In short: Viability of media goes far beyond the solvency and profitability of media outlets.



DW Akademie's Media Viability model centers around the media users having access to reliable, independent information. It widens the scope of traditional sustainability approaches and focuses on more than just the business models of individual media outlets.

3 levels: Organizations, networks and the overall environment (including markets, legal systems, politics, and technological infrastructure) are the relevant levels for Media Viability.

5 dimensions: Media Viability is about finding a stable balance between the aspects of politics and economics, the community, technology, and content.

DW Akademie's Media Viability Model

This is why DW Akademie takes a more holistic perspective: **Media viability is the ability of media outlets and media landscapes to produce high-quality journalism in a sustainable way.** This definition goes beyond the individual media outlet level and its revenue streams, taking into account the larger picture, including markets, networks, and individual outlets. This comprehensive approach is represented in DW

Akademie's Media Viability Model¹ (see above), which looks at five dimensions relevant to media viability and considers a country's entire information ecosystem, while keeping the user at the center of all analysis.

First, the **Political** environment is taken into account—at both the national and the local levels—and how it affects the diversity of views represented in news media content, as well as the extent to which news media are influenced and controlled by the government. The **Economics** dimension relates to financial and economic aspects of the media market, news media organizations, and their audiences. The **Community** dimension covers the audience's capacities and values as well as its relationships with media outlets, i.e., levels of trust, emotional attachment, and participation. The **Technology** dimension assesses the news media's access to production and distribution resources and technologies, and their ability to optimize the use of those resources. Finally, ownership, independence, and quality of the journalism available to the public is covered by the **Content** dimension. All dimensions relate to individual organizations, media networks, and the overall environment for news media, representing the micro, meso, and macro level of media viability.

The Media Viability Indicators (MVIs)

To assess media viability in a systematic way, DW Akademie has developed the Media Viability Indicators (MVIs). Based on the Media Viability Model and its five dimensions, they make the model's dimensions more tangible and—even more importantly—measurable. Across all dimensions, the MVIs focus on four overarching aspects, which were identified as cross-cutting topics relevant at all levels and for all actors involved: the **financial sustainability** of the news media industry; the **ability of news organizations to produce journalistic content** in an editorially independent way; the **quality of the journalistic content** produced; and news media's ability to serve the **needs and earn the trust of its audiences**.

Broken down, this means that when looking at the **Politics** dimension, it is important to assess whether the rule of law is supportive of independent and quality media. Does the country have an independent judiciary that applies laws and judgments impartially to businesses and individuals? Are the relations between a government and the news media professional and characterized by mutual respect? And in how far do citizens and journalists have access to public information?

The overall strength of a country's economy and the financial stability of news media organizations are of key importance

within the **Economics** dimension. However, it also assesses news media's editorial independence from their sources of income and to what extent competition fosters—or obstructs—the quality of journalism. Another essential aspect is the audiences' demand for quality news content and whether they are willing to pay for it.

Another crucial part of media viability is the relation between news media and their **Community**. Support by communities—whether financial or moral—to a media outlet might be one of the most powerful defenses against political interference. For this mutual support, it is important to have an understanding of shared accepted political and social values within a society, but also what kind of relationship people have with media outlets, i.e., their levels of trust and emotional attachment. At the same time, the level of media literacy among audiences plays an important role. Are people able to distinguish fact from fiction? And can they produce and contribute content in a responsible way? Finally, the Community dimension assesses whether media organizations have access to reliable data about audiences, their needs, and consumption habits.

The ability of news media organizations to fairly access and use production and distribution **Technology** is an essential prerequisite to news media viability. Equally important is the ability of citizens across the country to access this content, and being able to pay for it via trusted digital payment systems. Within the broader context, it should also be assessed to which degree the country and news organizations protect audience's digital rights, especially their privacy.

The quality of the national, international, and local news content available in the country has a direct effect on media viability—aspects covered within the **Content and Expertise** dimension. Do journalists have the necessary skills to produce non-partisan reports based on a number of different sources and also include voices of minorities? Do their working conditions foster or hinder ethical quality journalism? Is media ownership transparent—or does it prevent a diversity of voices and rather serve the business or political interests of media owners? Apart from journalistic skills, media organizations also need to prioritize the business side—this means, among other things, investing in qualified people and setting up effective structures that foster media viability.

Each of the five dimensions is measured by five key indicators, resulting in **25 media viability key indicators** in total. Each key indicator covers a broader topic (sub-dimensions) influencing the viability of news media, such as competition, participation, or business expertise. To go into more detail, each key indicator is specified by several sub-indicators to assess concrete aspects of a certain topic.

¹For more details, see "More than money: Rethinking Media Viability in the digital age", available at: [dw.com/en/more-than-money-rethinking-media-viability-in-the-digital-age/a-47825791](https://www.dw.com/en/more-than-money-rethinking-media-viability-in-the-digital-age/a-47825791)

The sub-indicators provide a focused insight, allowing for precision in identifying gaps as well as avenues for improvement. The number of sub-indicators used for each indicator varies. Overall, there are **119 sub-indicators**, making the MVIs a comprehensive, very detailed set of criteria. The table below gives an overview of the dimensions, sub-dimensions and key indicators. A full list of sub-indicators can be found here: [dw.com/akademie/mvi](https://www.dw.com/akademie/mvi)

What and who are the MVIs for?

The MVIs are a flexible framework for assessing media viability in a practical, solution-oriented, and tailor-made way. The overall aim is to gain systematic data on news media viability that helps to identify major challenges and threats so that appro-

appropriate responses can be recommended. The MVIs also provide global experts with a common language through which to understand news media viability. They are designed to make this complex issue more tangible and enhance the discussion of the challenges facing news media and societies.

The MVIs should be understood—and used—as a set of indicators, which can be applied individually, comprehensively or combined as needed. Applying all indicators will provide a comprehensive overview of the viability of a country's information ecosystem. However, it is also possible to assess a specific topic, e.g., the business structure of media organizations, by using one key indicator and its sub-indicators only. Or, if interested in one particular subject area, such as the community, one dimension can be examined. Moreover, if the media outlet level is of interest, all indicators focusing on individual media houses can be picked out and applied.

The Media Viability Indicators (MVIs): Dimensions, sub-dimensions and key indicators

1. POLITICS	
1	Rule of Law Government actions are determined by laws that are fairly applied and enforced.
2	Freedom of Expression The country has a strong legal framework supporting freedom of expression.
3	Access to Information Citizens and journalists can access public information.
4	Legal Equality Laws and regulations affecting news media organizations are comparable to those applied to other industries and are impartially enforced.
5	Media within Society Relations between government and news media organizations are mutually respectful and professional.
2. ECONOMICS	
6	National Economy The national economy is strong enough to make news media organizations financially viable.
7	Financial Stability of News Media Organizations News media organizations are financially stable.
8	Financial Independence of News Media Organizations News media organizations' sources of capital do not constrain their editorial independence.
9	Competition Moderate competition among news media organizations exists, allowing for quality journalism.
10	Audience Demand Audience demand for quality journalism content supports a strong news media industry.



3. COMMUNITY

11	Citizen Education Citizens are able to consume and evaluate the quality of news and information content across multiple platforms.
12	Social Cohesion Society is generally cohesive and peaceful, with the majority of citizens sharing accepted political and social values across diverse ethnicities, political and religious affiliations.
13	Trust and Credibility Citizens have a generally high level of confidence in the credibility of news media organizations and their content.
14	Participation Citizens contribute to the content produced and distributed by news media organizations.
15	Audience Data News media organizations have regular access to reliable data about audiences and their media uses.



4. TECHNOLOGY

16	Production and Distribution Resources News media organizations have access to the necessary production and distribution resources.
17	News Media Organizations' Access to Technologies News media organizations' access to production and distribution technologies is fair and apolitical.
18	Audience Access to Technologies Citizens can access and afford the technologies over which news media content is distributed.
19	Digital Expertise News media organizations have the technological expertise to optimize their use of digital production, distribution, and management technologies.
20	Citizens' Digital Rights The government, news media organizations, and private companies respect citizens' digital rights, allowing them to communicate freely and safely online.



5. CONTENT AND EXPERTISE

21	Quality Content The public has access to quality news media content.
22	Journalism Expertise News media organizations have the necessary structures as well as professionally educated and trained journalists to produce high quality content that meets international standards.
23	Ownership of News Media Organizations Ownership of news media organizations is transparent and does not prevent diversity of perspectives or quality journalism.
24	Business Structure News media organizations have the structures to be viable.
25	Business Expertise News media organizations have the personnel and expertise to be strategically and financially viable.

Furthermore, to assess a certain thematic aspect within media viability, relevant indicators can be combined. For instance, when analyzing the state of public access to information within a country and its effect on media viability, the MVIs 3 (Access to Information, Dimension Politics), 13 (Trust and Credibility, Dimension Community), 21 (Quality Content, Dimension Content and Expertise) and 22 (Journalism Expertise, Dimension Content and Expertise) could be combined. They provide insight into the legal environment guaranteeing (or not guaranteeing) public access to information, audiences' trust in news reporting and their access to quality reporting, as well as the ability of media to produce such content.

The MVIs are especially useful for media development actors, media owners and managers, donors in the field of media, good governance and human rights, academics, and media advocates. They allow for more precision in identifying avenues of capacity building and other activities for media development donors and actors, for strengthening media outlets for media owners and managers, and research for academia.

How can the MVIs be applied?

As the MVIs are a flexible framework, the methodologies for applying them can vary depending on the goals, focus, and scope of the assessment. Consequently, just one method for collecting data can be used, or a combination of different methods. If the focus lies on quality content, for example, it might make sense to conduct a content analysis and a survey among journalists. If the interest lies mainly in the legal environment for media viability, desk research and expert interviews might be the methods of choice. Furthermore, the results of an MVI assessment can be presented in text form, or numerical, rating each key indicator and/or dimension.

The methodology described below is suggested for a complete assessment, i.e., applying all MVIs to a country's information ecosystem, using numerical scores. In this case, it is most practical and feasible to gather data through desk research and systematic in-depth interviews with news media professionals and experts, supplemented, if possible, by additional evaluations from specific independent sources.

Each MVI sub-indicator is scored on a 4-point scale—with a score of 4 indicating that conditions are fully supportive of news media viability, while 1 indicates that conditions are a serious obstacle to news media viability in that country. If a sub-indicator is not relevant in a particular country, it is scored 0 and dropped when averaging the sub-indicators into a final score for each key indicator. The score for a key indicator is calculated by averaging the scores for all of its sub-indicators.

When completed, the maximum value for the Media Viability

Index is 100. The index score is reached by summing the value of the five dimensions, each of which has a maximum value of 20. The scores for the dimensions are achieved by adding the scores for each of the five key indicators within that dimension, which are achieved by averaging the scores for all of the relevant sub-indicators. For a more detailed description of the methodology, go to: dw.com/akademie/mvi

The numerical scores of the index make it possible to easily compare the level of news media viability across countries or even regions. The index also provides a tool to break down the complex issue of news media viability to its component parts (dimensions, key indicators), helping experts within a country understand where their efforts to improve viability might best be focused. If assessed on a regular basis, general and/or detailed changes can be tracked, thereby helping news outlets to adjust their viability strategies and supporting media development actors in their work and advocacy as the context evolves. Annual measurement can ensure appropriate follow-up actions.

Some limitations

Of course, as media viability is a very complex issue, this model has some limitations. Initial research on a country's media viability context that applied the MVIs has shown that the final score does not necessarily reflect the differences in importance of various sub-indicators for media viability. For example, having 12 daily newspapers in a city of 4 million people is weighted as equally important to the final level of news media viability as not having staff in most news organizations who know how to work around online censorship, or protect audiences' online privacy. As we know, in reality, these differences matter. What is needed in addition to the scores is therefore a qualitative assessment and explanation.

The MVIs also do not solve one important aspect within the challenge of ensuring the viability of a media outlet or entire media landscapes: key performance indicators on the relevant aspects of media viability. In the world of news media and in the media development community, there is no reliable data that provide performance targets on the MVIs, which result, individually or in different combinations with each other, in news media viability. One of those key questions, for example, is the range of profit margins at which news media organizations start cutting journalism staff—or their salaries—below the level where a news organization can no longer produce independent quality reporting that adequately serves its community. And what size does a news organization need to have in order to cover what size community?

Ultimately, if media professionals and media development experts are going to succeed in supporting news media viability, they have to know what they need to be aiming for on these key

performance indicators. Media experts need to understand the empirical benchmarks for these indicators just as environmental scientists know what the maximum rise in global temperature is before climate change becomes irreversible; or what the biggest sources of carbon emissions are in any given country so that CO2 levels can be reduced effectively.

Let's make the most of it

The MVIs provide a foundation for understanding the environment in which news media organizations are operating, so media development efforts can be prioritized and potential synergies identified. They are a first approach to systematically look at the key dimensions relevant to news media viability across the globe, while helping to create a common language among the various stakeholders. The MVIs provide a categorization scheme for the complex factors that affect media viability, and a scale for assessing the degree to which those factors support or challenge media viability in a specific context. This categorization and assessment framework provides a necessary first

step towards understanding and addressing news media viability in different socio-economic and political environments. For media development experts and news organization managers, the MVIs also provide specific measures for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of a news organization. MVI assessments make it possible for different stakeholders to try out new, informed approaches and ways, and thereby getting a step closer to solving what is most likely the biggest challenge for modern information ecosystems.

Without a common framework, concrete and practical solutions will not present themselves. Data and evidence are needed, with practical tools to both collect and assess them. The MVI framework provides a foundation for developing key performance indicators so that benchmarks for successful news media organizations and successful media ecosystems can be identified. Above all, the goal is to support news media viability across the globe. Because only by developing strong, sustainable news ecosystems that produce quality journalism trusted and supported by their audiences, can the future of news media—and our democracies—be secured.

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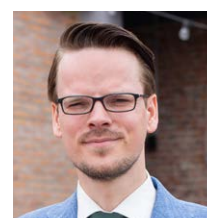
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