

Defying Expectations

Essays on innovation, resilience, and sustainability
in independent media across South and Southeast Asia



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PREFACE

Grace Thu , Program Director, Amplify Asia Program

Through our work with independent media across South and Southeast Asia, we have seen how complex and challenging it can be to sustain public interest journalism over time. Many media organizations operate in contexts shaped by political pressure, shrinking civic space, rapid technological change, and declining donor funding. These conditions make it difficult not only to grow, but sometimes simply to continue operating. Yet despite these challenges, they continue to adapt, experiment, and innovate to ensure that millions of people across the region have access to reliable news and information.

They do so despite an all-too-common assumption that independent media, particularly those operating in challenging political and financial environments, cannot sustain themselves. This report highlights some examples of the ways in which they are doing so and, in so doing, defying expectations.

Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) has been working with independent media in challenging environments for three decades, supporting organizations to strengthen financial and organizational sustainability. This collection of essays brings together experiences from our media partners, our coaches, and our consultants working to strengthen the resilience of public interest journalism in South and Southeast Asia. Their stories show that innovation is possible even in difficult circumstances, and that financial sustainability and editorial independence can be mutually reinforcing.

Across the region our media partners are exploring different pathways to sustainability. Some are testing audience-supported revenue models such as membership and subscriptions. Others are developing sales pipelines from both commercial and non-commercial sectors, digital products, strengthening audience engagement, or expanding services based on their editorial expertise. Despite operating in very different

based on their editorial expertise. Despite operating in very different contexts, they all share a strong commitment to public interest journalism and a willingness to adapt in order to continue serving their audiences.

One key lesson is that sustainability does not come from applying a single model. Each organization operates in a different political, economic, and cultural context, and even media within the same country may require different approaches. Building sustainability therefore requires innovation, flexibility, patience, and continuous adjustment. Media organizations need space to test ideas, learn from both successes and failures, and gradually develop models that fit their editorial mission, audiences, and markets.

Strong editorial quality remains the foundation on which independent media are built. However, editorial integrity alone does not ensure sustainability. Media organizations also need strong business and organizational capacity to maintain their operations.

Through our business capacity building initiatives with independent media in South and Southeast Asia, MDIF works with our media partners to strengthen audience development, revenue diversification, digital development, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices, human resource systems, and financial management. Our approach focuses on strengthening the overall health of media organizations so that editorial work can continue with greater stability and independence. This includes working closely with media organizations through long-term and intensive coaching, specialist technical assistance, workshop support, and peer-to-peer exchange. Financial resilience is key to editorial independence and is particularly critical where access to reliable information is increasingly fragile. Diversified revenue and stronger internal systems allow media organizations to make decisions with greater confidence and stability, even in uncertain environments.

Peer-to-peer exchanges have also been an important part of this work. Media organizations operating in different contexts nevertheless often face similar challenges in building sustainable business models.

Sharing experiences across countries helps partners learn from one another, reduces isolation, and builds confidence to test new ideas. These exchanges also strengthen a sense of shared purpose among independent media working in challenging environments.

We describe the role of independent media in such contexts as creating “islands of coherence.” When the broader environment becomes unstable politically, socially, or economically, these organizations continue to operate with integrity and represent individual islands of coherence. Together, they can form an archipelago of trusted information spaces that support one another and strengthen the communities they serve.

This publication is intended to contribute to ongoing conversations about the future of independent media, particularly in contexts where traditional funding models are no longer an option. While each organization’s journey is unique, we hope the insights presented here offer useful reflections for practitioners, donors, and supporters committed to strengthening independent journalism globally. Many of these lessons may also resonate with other mission-driven organizations facing similar pressures to adapt, innovate, and sustain their work as funding landscapes shift and operating conditions become more uncertain.

This publication would not have been possible without the contributions of our media partners, coaches, and consultants, who generously shared their experiences. These journeys remind us that building resilient and sustainable media organizations takes time, and that meaningful progress remains possible, even when the path forward is uncertain.

People's Spring: Making money from digital revenue



Tosca Santoso, MDIF coach

Someone once said it is impossible for Myanmar media to expect revenue from digital platforms. Not only is Myanmar's domestic audience excluded from advertising opportunities, but social media algorithms frequently change at the whim of their owners. Revenue from digital platforms is generally volatile and difficult to rely on. People's Spring's experience proves otherwise. During the first three quarters of 2025, the media outlet managed to cover 35% of its operating costs from digital revenue coming solely from social media platforms.

People's Spring is a new media outlet, emerging after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar. Although its management had experience leading national media during the democratic era, they had to start from scratch in exile. The transformation was huge and was certainly not easy. But People's Spring's founders have successfully laid an organizational foundation that allows the outlet to operate effectively, despite the multiple pressures of running a media in exile while maintaining editorial quality.

People's Spring chose to focus its coverage and to target its audience on the Anya region of Upper and Central Myanmar. This differentiates it from other established exile media outlets that focus on other parts of the country or on specific ethnic groups or communities.

This new outlet relies solely on digital platforms for distribution of its content. The website, <https://ludunwayoo.com>, serves as its primary home. However, its largest distribution network is on social media: Facebook, YouTube and recently TikTok. Through these social media

channels, People's Spring has attracted nearly 4 million subscribers and followers and records approximately 250 million views each month. This is an impressive achievement for a media organization that is only four years old and operates in exile.

"The growth has been very rapid over the past year," said the Editor-in-Chief. He cited the example of YouTube subscribers, which reached 540,000 last September, a threefold increase in just one year. He explained that a key factor in this increase is the creativity of the newsroom. They train themselves to create journalism products that their audiences need and present them in engaging video formats.



People's Spring news presenter

Despite working under the shadow of concerns for the safety of their team, People's Spring's management remains undeterred and continues to focus on the sustainability of their outlet. That's why the management, led by the Managing Editor, is focusing on generating revenue. They are targeting various revenue streams, one of which is via its digital platforms. While YouTube and Facebook contributed a third of People's Spring's revenue from

January to September 2025, in September alone digital revenue covered half of the media's operational costs. This indicates a continuing upward trend in digital revenue which People's Spring wishes to maximize, while recognizing that the trend could decline just as quickly should social media platforms' algorithms suddenly change.

A key to this is flexibility. "We are seriously monitoring revenue from digital platforms and discussing it with the newsroom," the Managing Editor said. They hold weekly editorial meetings, where they discuss the news agenda and the newsroom's performance in generating revenue. They analyze Facebook and YouTube data together. For example, what news stories resonate with audiences and generate the most revenue? Is that news still viable? What formats are suitable for specific digital platforms? How important is the presenter's role in enhancing the performance of audio-visual products? The People's Spring team is very responsive to any findings or policy changes on their social media platforms. But they are also careful not to let revenue opportunities eclipse editorial priorities. Generating income is important but producing reliable and relevant information is at the heart of what they do, and that is what guides their work.

"We're fortunate that our editorial colleagues are aligned with management and recognize the need to continuously increase revenue from digital platforms but without compromising our editorial ethics," the Managing Editor added. This understanding is crucial, considering that, as a new media outlet, People's Spring doesn't easily find donors willing to provide grants. Furthermore, seeing the dwindling number of donors to Myanmar media outlets, People's Spring has been motivated to focus on securing revenue from social media platforms. While TikTok has been slow to generate revenue, People's Spring is now exploring revenue by participating in affiliate programs.

Digital platforms also provide ways to attract financial support from audiences. People's Spring utilizes Facebook's membership facility to manage audience revenue. It is easy to use, eliminating the need for the media to create a membership system or find payment methods, which are often cumbersome for Myanmar media outlets in exile. People's Spring simply activates the facility button, sets a membership fee and promotes the program in Facebook posts. By the end of 2025, they had 200 members, each paying \$3 per month. This is a good additional revenue stream, without the hassle of setting up a membership system. The same facility will be used on the YouTube platform.

Of course, digital revenue isn't the only source of income. People's Spring is also developing businesses such as producing Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and managing content analysis services for its clients. However, revenue from social media platforms is clearly becoming increasingly important, especially as donor grants become ever more difficult to obtain.

In 2025, People's Spring managed to generate enough self-made revenue to cover around 55% of its operating costs — a remarkable outcome for a Myanmar media outlet in exile. For media operating outside the country, commercial opportunities are limited, donor funding is unpredictable and audience behaviour is shaped by platform constraints. People's Spring navigated this by combining revenue from Facebook and YouTube, PSA collaborations with local and international NGOs, and from its membership program. The result suggests that diversification can be a viable path to sustainability, even in exile.

Some names have been omitted for safety reasons.

How Amplify Asia helped

Kalam Weekly

reach new heights



Pranaya Rana, Founding Editor, Kalam Weekly

The Nepali media landscape is flourishing. There are dozens of newspapers, both national and local, hundreds of digital media outlets and a plethora of new media offerings like podcasts, video explainers and social media pages. Yet the average Nepali audience is more misinformed than ever. Clickbait headlines, contextless articles and piecemeal news characterize the Nepali media. Even legacy media houses have succumbed to the siren song of an algorithm-based news cycle, sacrificing readability and depth for clicks and views.

Around the world, the rise of social media, shifting audience habits and the collapse of traditional advertising have reshaped the business economics of journalism, often at the expense of depth and trust. In Nepal, these global pressures are compounded by the media's fraught relationship with the market. For too long, mainstream media have indulged in a quid pro quo with commercial interests. In exchange for securing paid advertisements, the media refrains from critical reporting targeting businesses and those who run them. Independent media, acknowledging that advertisements often come with strings attached that influence editorial content, have been reluctant to accept commercial advertising. This generally results in reliance on grant funding, which comes with its own set of challenges. Grant awards are designed to respond to donor agendas, rather than the needs of the recipients. They are also generally short-term and irregular, leaving independent media continually seeking new grants to replace those that have run out.

This is what happened at my previous workplace, The Record, a digital native independent publication. While The Record was steadfastly

independent, it relied primarily on grants to support its operations. Thus, when the grant funding ended in 2021, the publication went on an indefinite hiatus, where it remains to this day.

While working at The Record as its Chief Editor, I started a newsletter, initially titled Off the Record, a current affairs digest of major events in Nepal occurring the previous week. When The Record suspended operations, I continued the newsletter, intending to provide continuity and keep our readers engaged with the brand until The Record resumed operations. Over time, it became clear that this would not happen anytime soon, and I decided, in August 2024, to take the newsletter independent and rebrand it as Kalam Weekly. However, I faced the same dilemma that The Record had contended with – how to finance independent media without succumbing to either the whims of the market or the demands of donors?

As Kalam Weekly was a newsletter, the natural course was to explore paid subscriptions. Kalam Weekly provides contextual political analysis in English, filling a gap in the market that suggested some revenue potential. We had attempted this model at The Record, though with little success. Now, though, I hoped that my newsletter, hosted on Substack with a built-in payment processor, could generate enough reader revenue to keep it afloat. But I was unsure that this was possible. As a career journalist, I was confident of the content I was producing but had little idea how to monetize a newsletter and pursue strategic audience growth and revenue. This is where MDIF's Amplify Asia program, designed to support independent media to explore their business potential, came in.

I joined the Amplify Asia program in July 2024, seeking guidance on how to expand my audience and assess the potential revenue from my newsletter. The Amplify Asia team recommended that I work with one of their business coaches, Kim Bode, a US-based audience and product strategist, coach and consultant with a wealth of experience in newsletter engagement and strategically driving audience growth.

It proved an excellent match and, through fortnightly meetings, she

helped us figure out how to both increase our free subscriber base and convert them into paid supporters. When we joined Amplify Asia, Kalam had roughly 3,200 free subscribers and 50 paid subscribers, each paying an average of \$100 a year. Under Kim's direction, we conducted a reader survey and developed an end-of-year subscription drive, encouraging our free subscribers to upgrade to paid status, reminding them that this would help keep Kalam independent. The drive was more successful than I had ever imagined. Our initial goal was to reach 100 paid supporters, but we shot past this target only halfway through the campaign. By the end of 2024, we had more than doubled our paid subscriber base to 120 supporters.



Kalam in-person coaching meeting.

In addition to the hands-on support that Kim has provided to Kalam, MDIF's Amplify Asia program has also facilitated training and workshops for the Kalam team. We have attended workshops on newsletter growth, AI usage in the newsroom and sales and marketing. These sessions not only taught us much that we hadn't considered before but also connected us to like-minded institutions from across Asia. Our conversations and connections have sparked ideas and allowed us to feel less alone in pursuing journalism as independent organizations.

In 2025, on Kim's recommendation and with support from Amplify Asia, Kalam was able to bring on board its first employee – a strategic partnerships and marketing associate – to help pursue more paid memberships and explore outside partnerships with like-minded organizations and institutions. I had previously done this work in addition to being



Supporters at Kalam's 200th issue event, Kathmandu, August 2025.

the sole writer of the Kalam Weekly newsletter. Hiring an employee has allowed me to focus more on the editorial side while our new employee handles subscription drives, events and partnerships.

We held a subscription drive late last year, targeting a total of 225 paid subscribers by year end, a goal we substantially exceeded, achieving 254 paid subscribers. As of March 2026, Kalam Weekly subscribers have reached a total of 5,100, of which 280 are paid supporters. We are well on our way. Our gross annual revenue has increased by more than 180% since we joined Amplify Asia 16 months ago. Much of this success can be attributed to Kim's guidance and the Amplify Asia program. Without their help, I doubt Kalam would've gotten to where it is today.

As journalists, we often lack the expertise to develop the business side of our media. We are so focused on our editorial work that we neglect sustainability and profitability. But a good organization must earn its keep, and that is what Amplify Asia has allowed us to do.

Project Multatuli: Combining mission, impact, and sustainability



**PROJECT
MULTATULI**
Melayani yang Dipinggirkan

Yulia Sri Perdani, Collaboration Director, Project Multatuli

It was May 2021. COVID-19 was raging, increasing the already major challenges being faced by Indonesian media outlets. Not an auspicious time for a new independent media to start up. Nevertheless, a group of seasoned journalists joined forces to do so, and Project Multatuli was born. The name derives from the pen name of a 19th-century Dutch writer who exposed the suffering of Indonesians under Dutch colonial rule.

Just like the man behind the name, Project Multatuli seeks to hold power accountable and to give voice to the voiceless in today's Indonesia.

We publish long-form investigative pieces that can take up to six months to produce, bucking the trend for ever shorter articles or short videos. Somehow, it works. From a media reliant at the outset on grants, last year earned revenue and membership grew to 54% of our income, surpassing grants for the first time.

Two major factors are responsible for this growth. First, our team of experienced professionals is fully committed to Project Multatuli's mission. This commitment is vital. Our work has often drawn negative government scrutiny and DDoS attacks, particularly after publishing reports critical of government institutions. We've had to go to great lengths to protect our sources and writers from intimidation.

This team – 18 full-timers and a network of over 200 freelancers – has earned Project Multatuli multiple awards and nominations. More importantly, our work has real-world impact. Project Multatuli's #PercumaLaporPolisi (NoUseReportingtoPolice) reports on the police's

poor handling of rape cases, for instance, prompted lawmakers to demand police accountability, while the viral hashtag compelled the national police chief to make the force more responsive to public complaints.



Project Multatuli podcast production.

Secondly, we embrace experimentation. In this dynamic media landscape, there's no exact formula for sustainability. So we have learned as we go, conducting experiments to test out different ideas for running and sustaining our media.

This is where MDIF's Amplify Asia program comes in. Since 2022, MDIF has helped us to develop our business, membership program, and digital infrastructure. It also connects us with a network of independent media across Asia and beyond through training, conferences, and sharing sessions.

MDIF provides guidance and ample freedom. Our primary mentor, Tosca Santoso, gives us space to learn, discuss, experiment (and make necessary mistakes), to create something that really works for our audience. Through MDIF's guidance (shout out to our specialist mentor, Rico Grimm from Krautreporter), we developed our membership program, Kawan M, which has gained over 500 recurring monthly members and 3,000 unique members. Amplify Asia has also helped us improve our project management and business strategies.

We build a culture of transparency by sharing potential projects, progress, and revenue with the whole team. The editorial team makes the final decision on whether to accept or reject a project. This builds awareness of business sustainability across the organization. We have learned to be an agile team and give each staff member a chance to contribute to different projects. This not only benefits Project M's business but also improves staff satisfaction and offers them opportunities to learn new skills, earn extra income, and take a break from their daily work routine.



Project Multatuli panel discussion and training.

For projects, we apply a strict negative list, rejecting clients from bodies and corporations involved in environmental destruction and human rights violations. Even with this policy, we still have enough clients to keep us busy, and our income still comfortably covers operations. More importantly, our

substantial progress in increasing non-donor revenue validates what MDIF's Amplify Asia prepared us for: building resilient revenue streams to reduce grant dependence and create sustainable growth.

Our significant success in growing non-donor revenue also brings fresh challenges: how to achieve greater impact and sustainability without overworking a small team (yes, we have a vision to remain a small core team to keep us nimble). If our journey proves anything, it's that transparency, collaboration, and bold experiments can chart a path forward, even in the most challenging markets.

Leveraging AI while upholding journalistic ethics

Tosca Santoso, MDIF coach



This independent news agency, operating for nearly seven decades in Pakistan, is like a car with a new engine. Pakistan Press International (PPI) is undergoing rapid and fundamental transformation, from its working methods to its business model. The new generation of management at the organization has chosen the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a disruptive factor to improve editorial processes, accelerate workflow and drastically increase production volume.

Sana Ali, the third-generation leader of PPI, said her organization had long operated manually. But two years ago, PPI began experimenting with AI to accelerate news production, starting with stock market news. News from the stock exchange is typically simple and formatted to a standard. But speed is crucial, as it must be released the same day. Sana Ali and her team first tried using Chat GPT and Gemini; and then, with the help of an AI company, created their own tools to meet their needs.

"A news agency like PPI has to process high volumes of content, but manual methods simply can't handle it," Sana said. AI transformed that challenge into tangible results. Currently, PPI produces more than 40,000 news stories per month. A tenfold increase compared to before the use of AI.

News agencies like PPI rely on revenue from subscribers: media outlets or databases that utilize their news reports or photos. The business model is B2B. Media subscribers pay a fixed fee, regardless of the amount of content they use. Recently, it has been very difficult to increase revenue from media outlets. Meanwhile, revenue from databases depends on the amount of content they use.

Therefore, PPI's increased news volume has massively increased its database revenue, by around 600%.

Having successfully used AI for stock market news, PPI is now expanding to other coverage. Other news items, such as weather and sports, are also suitable to be optimized with AI. PPI produces news reports in two languages: Urdu and English. Of course, AI can now simplify translation. AI also helps PPI tag photo documentation, one of its organizational assets. But PPI's greatest assets are its credibility and network. They won't risk their credibility in a trial run using AI.

Ultimately, the journalist is responsible for the story. AI only assists in the production process; it does not replace the ethical role of journalists. That's why, before starting the AI trial, Sana prioritized the creation of Standard Operating Procedures. This ensured that everyone involved understood that AI was just a tool and how to use it. The process was inclusive, through trial and error, until AI became a vital part of PPI's current work processes. "We maintain a human role in supervision to improve quality," Sana explained.

PPI is supported by 20 staff at the headquarters in Karachi and more than 100 correspondents across Pakistan. Its network of correspondents and media clients is its strength. PPI has previously operated with a B2B business model. However, the changing media landscape, with the emergence of various digital platforms, now offers a B2C business opportunity. PPI's content can attract a direct audience and, therefore, PPI's management plans to experiment with social media platforms. In this regard, AI and a Content Management System (CMS) will again be crucial.



Bureau chief at work in the PPI newsroom.

For example, there needs to be a way to separate content presented on social media platforms from that distributed to national subscribers,

newspapers and television stations. These media outlets will naturally lose interest in paying if PPI's content has already been published for free on their social media platforms. PPI will need to differentiate. It will ensure that existing customers continue to receive exclusive content, while its social media platforms attract a direct audience. In 2026, PPI is exploring social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok to reach audiences directly. This will also increase new revenue streams. PPI will expand its product offerings to video. This format is well-suited for social media platforms and is in demand by younger audiences.



Sana Ali outlining PPI's journey at a business development workshop in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

PPI has been strong in producing text and photos which are used daily by Pakistani national media. The addition of video services will enhance PPI's standing with its customers. "Video will fill a gap in customer demand," said Sana. While revenue from existing customers is difficult to increase, they are key customers who have supported PPI for years. Loyalty is a key part of PPI's history.

Now, a new chapter is underway: PPI Digital. With very different elements than the old PPI. There's AI, a CMS and video production. The business model has also transformed from solely B2B, to B2B and B2C. But one thing remains timeless: credibility. PPI has endured a long history, surviving various political upheavals in Pakistan, thanks to the public's trust in its news, and that is an asset that this media is determined to protect.

Putting people at the heart of business growth

Jane Stageman, MDIF consultant

My work collaborating on the development of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies and practices with MDIF's Myanmar media partners began in 2019. After two years, one of the major conclusions of that work was that inclusion is good for business when it becomes business as usual.

However, business as usual was upended by subsequent events, first COVID-19 and then the 2021 military coup. These events, though, demonstrated that inclusion was important for a different reason: it offered creativity, innovation and new skills in surprising ways. This is how the chief editor of Hakka Post explained the impact of the pandemic, for example: "So, while COVID-19 has been a challenge for media outlets, it's also been an eye-opener. We're finally recognising the potential of our younger women staff members, and the creative ideas they've proposed and developed have expanded our digital work, making it a more successful part of our business."

Business as usual may have changed in its delivery but people have remained at the heart of this new business growth. The same challenges of creating a positive and productive work environment persisted as well as bringing new demands. Diversity, equity and inclusion could not be considered as something addressed in isolation to workplace and workforce. Rather, to be part of business as usual, it needed to be an integral part of the solution.

For this reason, in 2023 we designed a workshop with media outlets relocated on the Thai Border called 'Inclusive Human Resource Policy Workshop' with the goal of collaboratively creating an outline of a human resource policy. The workshop focuses on developing principles and procedures in a range of areas: workplace behaviour, recruitment,

reasonable adjustments, key benefits, learning and development and handling grievances, discipline and termination. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential considerations at every stage. Adopting an Inclusive Human Resource Policy has meant combining the creativity and innovation that diversity, equity, and inclusion can bring with greater workforce and organisational sustainability. To date, four of MDIF's Myanmar media partners have created such a policy, with two more due to do so soon.

A feature of all the collaborative work with media partners is an inclusive approach. Leaders, managers, and employees participate together in customised in-house workshops, each designed specifically for the respective media outlet. The goal has been to create a safe setting that encourages inclusive behaviour, a willingness to listen to different perspectives, to challenge constructively and to be able to reach a consensus. In this respect, they have tried to be models themselves of an inclusive organisational culture. The value of this approach was summarized by a staff member of Mandalay Free Press who said: "The IHR policy will create a more equal work environment between the employees and managers because of agreeing and owning the fair guidelines."

Despite the positive feedback to our work, we recognize that embedding diversity, equity and inclusion into the workplace is an ongoing process. That is why follow-up meetings are held to review and revise action plans. Patriarchal and traditional assumptions and prejudice, particularly those held by people in powerful positions, do not vanish overnight and need checking and constant challenge.

Last year, my work with MDIF expanded beyond Myanmar to engage media partners in South Asia. Since then, we have held workshops on diversity, equity, and inclusion in Colombo, Sri Lanka, as well as in Karachi and Islamabad, Pakistan. A similarly inclusive approach has been used to better understand what employees and managers need across various cultural settings. In Pakistan, the participation of a Pakistani co-facilitator has been important in addressing relevant legal considerations as well as overcoming language barriers.



Jane Stageman (right) leading DEI workshop, Karachi, August 2025.

The three South Asian media organisations worked with to date already had, to a greater or lesser degree, employment policies and procedures to guide their people-focused practice. However, there has been a real interest in learning more about what inclusive organisations do differently, how they create a feeling of belonging

for all employees, whatever their identity and background and to appreciate how discrimination works both consciously and unconsciously in language and behaviour. As a staff member at The Centrum Media in Pakistan commented: “Diversity, equity and inclusion has always seemed like an extra step to incorporate into company structures but today we learnt how essential they are.”

Another recent development on the journey of inclusion has been to place a particular focus on sexual harassment, working closely with a Burmese women’s media organisation. Not only has this enriched the discussions but our hope is that in future this women’s media can offer sexual harassment workshops or modules to other media outlets and businesses themselves, without the need for MDIF’s involvement.



DEI workshop, Karachi, August 2025.

I feel privileged to be part of the ever-evolving journey of inclusion and human resource work with media partners in Myanmar and South Asia. I have met so many committed and inspiring people, particularly talented and strong women, from whom I continue to learn.

Whilst it is hard to predict the future, one thing is certain, people are a rich resource for every media business. Ensuring everyone in a workplace, regardless of their background, identity or circumstance, feels valued, treated fairly, and supported to succeed, remains essential to its growth.

Who says exile media can't make money?



LUẬT KHOA
tạp chí

Dávid Tvrdoň, MDIF coach

In 2025, the global media landscape experienced a major shift in accessible aid and funding. And I'm not just talking about the gutting of USAID, that was merely the culmination of a trend many had warned about for years, while others kept dismissing such a possibility as alarmist. The tightening of international support for independent media has forced organizations worldwide to rethink their sustainability models, particularly those operating in exile.

I was fortunate to begin working with Vietnamese outlet Luật Khoa and Burmese news platform Myanmar Now during this critical transition period. Both are exiled media organizations, with leadership and many staff members living outside their home countries. Despite the distance and difficulties, both continue doing diligent journalistic work, covering events within the nations they dream of returning to one day.

This profound love for one's own country and people taught me a great deal about being a patriot in the truest sense of the word. Not the performative nationalism we've become accustomed to seeing from authoritarians, dictators, or far-right politicians, but genuine service to one's community through truth and accountability.

Both organizations offer invaluable lessons in long-term planning while building independent outlets that must become sustainable amid government crackdowns, always maintaining the hope of one day becoming a "regular" part of their country's media ecosystem, doing their work from home rather than from behind borders.

When I first met Swe Win, the founder of Myanmar Now, it was in Vienna during a conference where he received the 2023 Free Media Pioneer award. During a panel I hosted, he spoke passionately about the projects

he planned to launch and his vision for building a community that would one day sustain the entire organization. At the time, I didn't know that I would become part of that story too, thanks to MDIF, which gave me the opportunity to work closely with the whole team.

When we started working together, the donor environment was very different to the situation we are experiencing today. Back then, there was little pressure for independent media to focus on



Myanmar Now online coaching session.

audience-funded sustainability, and many were resistant to doing so. Myanmar Now was no exception. Thankfully, over time, we were able to demonstrate that establishing non-donor revenue sources need not negatively impact a media's independence. Consequently, when donor funding dramatically reduced in early 2025, Myanmar Now had already set up a paid subscription service for its English site.

Over two years of collaboration, we achieved significant milestones. We launched multiple newsletters, completely redesigned the website, introduced a subscription model for the English-language content, and created a membership program for the Burmese-speaking audience. We also executed several strategic outreach campaigns. All these initiatives shared a simple but crucial goal: securing direct support from the audience and reducing reliance on external donor funding. The road ahead remains long and challenging but witnessing thousands of online comments from fans and supporters cheering and rooting for Swe Win and the brave journalists and editors of the Myanmar Now team has been genuinely life changing. This overwhelming support demonstrates what authentic audience service looks like, and within it lies the true foundation of sustainability for any modern media organization.

The story of Luật Khoa shares many parallels, though my first meeting

Bratislava. We met in person a year later in Malaysia and his passion for independent journalism and free media in Vietnam was immediately palpable. He brimmed with ideas about building a media house that would serve the Vietnamese community while also informing international audiences.



Luật Khoa in-person coaching session.

Luật Khoa and its dedicated team have undergone a substantial transformation of their business model and approach to future sustainability. Like Myanmar Now, Luật Khoa's team initially favoured using donor funding to support its journalism, rather than relying on their audience to be the cornerstone of overall revenue. Their concern was that the audience could not generate enough revenue to sustain a media organization. Fast forward two years and Luật Khoa's audience has been growing week by week after they started doing breaking news stories.

Audience revenue is just their latest endeavour. Before that they started by introducing new news products, including a weekly news summary newsletter that has since evolved into a daily news production vertical currently being built out. For years, Luật Khoa has invested heavily in creating explanatory videos, which helped introduce the brand to wider audiences.

Both Myanmar Now and Luật Khoa offer numerous lessons that directly counter the persistent narrative that exile media shouldn't or can't generate revenue. In fact, building sustainable income streams is proving to be an absolute necessity for long-term survival. Let's be honest: a healthy donor ecosystem should actively seek to fund media organizations that demonstrate the ambition and capability to eventually operate independently of donor support.

Both media prioritized understanding their audiences first. Launching comprehensive audience surveys revealed reader preferences and

gave both outlets clear insights into whom they serve. This information proves invaluable not just for editorial direction but also for building future advertising revenue streams.

Second, establishing direct communication channels with audiences became essential. One of the most effective solutions was launching newsletters. Email newsletters don't just collect contact information, they build daily or weekly habits, creating regular touchpoints where subscribers spend meaningful time with your content in their inboxes, strengthening the relationship between outlet and reader.

Third, both organizations approached their future by building news products specifically designed to serve their audiences' needs rather than simply producing whatever seemed easiest or most familiar. This audience-first product development strategy ensures that growth is organic and sustainable.

The experiences of Myanmar Now and Luật Khoa illuminate a crucial truth: exile media can build sustainable business models even while operating under extraordinary constraints. Their success stems from unwavering commitment to serving their audiences, willingness to experiment with new revenue streams and content formats, and recognition that long-term independence requires short-term investment in audience development and product innovation.

The future belongs to media organizations that view their audiences not as passive consumers but as active partners in sustaining quality journalism.

Digital dexterity: Strengthening media in a digital-first world

Nan Khine May Zin, Senior Digital Specialist, MDIF

When I started working with MDIF's Myanmar partners in early 2021, the media landscape was already changing fast — and not by choice. Overnight, following the February 2021 military coup, journalists had to move their work, their teams and even their lives online. At the time, MDIF's Myanmar Media Program (MMP) was working with 32 media. Many of them came from print or broadcast backgrounds, where “digital” was still new territory. Suddenly, going digital became the only way to survive.

Before the coup, partners generally had very limited digital capacity. Their use of online tools was basic — posting on social media, updating websites occasionally, or using messaging apps to coordinate work. Few had experience with analytics dashboards, digital security tools, or online monetization systems. When everything shifted online, the learning curve felt overwhelming. Guiding partners through that transition required patience and repetition, but their willingness to adapt reminded me that transformation is always possible, even in crisis.

My focus at the start was simply helping partners stay connected and safe. Phishing attempts were rampant, accounts were being hijacked and sensitive information could easily end up in the wrong hands. Many teams were sharing passwords through chat apps or using the same login across multiple platforms. I remember one partner telling me, “We're already running for our lives — now we have to run from hackers too.”

So we began with the basics: password managers, two-factor authentication and safe online communication practices. It sounds simple now, but at that time even those small changes felt like

Gradually, I saw teams become more confident in taking control of their digital safety — not just protecting themselves but protecting their entire newsroom.

Treating data as a friend, not an enemy

As the months passed, our conversations began shifting from survival to sustainability. Once partners felt more secure online, they wanted to focus on their audiences — how to build engagement, grow loyal communities and find ways to keep their work financially alive.

That's when my role evolved into something much more creative. I worked closely with different outlets to analyze audience data, explore social media strategies and introduce new storytelling formats. For many, this was their first time looking at analytics dashboards or thinking about metrics like reach, retention and conversion. At first, the numbers were intimidating. 'We're journalists, not data scientists!' someone laughed during a session. But soon they began to see data as a friend, not an enemy.

In those early months, there was considerable skepticism about whether smaller media outlets — especially those operating in exile and with limited digital experience — could realistically generate meaningful digital revenue. Many assumed that only larger, better-resourced newsrooms would be able to navigate platform algorithms, meet monetization thresholds, or maintain steady online income. But the outcomes we observed told a different story. Through steady coaching, experimentation and a willingness to embrace new digital practices, even small and resource-constrained newsrooms proved that significant digital revenue is achievable. And while digital income will always fluctuate with changing algorithms and platform policies, our experience has shown that when teams have the skills to adapt and diversify, digital revenue can become an important and reliable source of supplemental income during such challenging times.

One outlet's transformation stays with me. It was a small independent newsroom formed in exile after the coup. Their team embraced a data-driven mindset, checking their insights regularly and adjusting their content decisions with intention. The results were astonishing:

since the February 2021 coup, their audience has grown more than 735%, and their digital revenue has increased by over 5,100%. Seeing that transformation — from hesitant experimentation to confident strategy — has been incredibly rewarding.

Another memorable experience was with a national media organization that was already producing strong journalism but needed help optimizing its video platforms. I shared detailed feedback on titles, upload timing and content strategy. They applied those suggestions consistently and, over time, their online video revenue has grown by 215% since the coup. It was a quiet but powerful success — proof that even small, consistent improvements can lead to meaningful results.

Collaboration is the most powerful tool

When I look back on this journey, one of the hardest parts wasn't the technical work, but encouraging partners to take what they learned and implement it actively within their teams. Many would attend training sessions, nod enthusiastically and then struggle to bring those lessons into daily practice. Change takes cooperation — not just knowledge. That's why seeing teams like the previously mentioned independent online outlet thrive through internal collaboration has been so inspiring. Their success came from working together, sharing ideas and committing as a team to experiment and improve. On the revenue side, the digital shift also brought new opportunities, though not without frustration.



In-person digital training session for a Burmese media partner.

Before the coup, some partners used Facebook Instant Articles for monetization. Later, from 2022–2025, we explored In-Stream Ads and other Facebook content monetization programs. I also helped partners navigate YouTube monetization. Some who initially didn't meet the criteria subsequently managed to qualify after their audiences grew dramatically in exile. One partner proudly told me, "We finally made it to four digits this month!" It wasn't just about the number — it symbolized resilience, creativity and the power of adaptation.

Each partner's story is different, but what connects them all is their determination. Even while scattered across different countries and time zones, they continue to tell stories that matter, finding new ways to reach their communities. I've been privileged to witness this digital transformation up close, not as a top-down process but as a shared learning journey.

Personally, this work has changed me too. I've learned that transformation doesn't happen because of one big breakthrough — it happens through small, steady steps. I've also realized that digital growth isn't only about algorithms or platforms; it's about people — their trust, their creativity and their willingness to keep learning, even when everything around them feels uncertain.

Today, as I continue working with MDIF's Myanmar media partners, I see a new generation of digital leaders emerging — journalists who are not just surviving but innovating. They're building communities online, experimenting with storytelling formats and turning digital tools into engines of sustainability.

The challenges remain immense, but so does the potential. Each year brings new obstacles — new algorithms, new risks, new platforms to master — yet the spirit of Myanmar's independent media remains strong. My hope for the next chapter is that these outlets will not only sustain themselves digitally but also help each other grow, forming a network of collaboration and shared resilience.

If the past four years have taught me anything, it's that no one faces the digital storm alone. We learn together, we adapt together and we move forward together — one click, one story, one secure login at a time.

Satire as resistance, creativity as courage



Simu Naser, Founder and Chief Editor, Earki

When laughter becomes dangerous, satire turns into an act of courage. That has been the story of Earki, Bangladesh’s most daring digital satire platform – one that has spent nearly the past decade pushing the boundaries of free expression through wit, irony and bold storytelling. What began as a small group of writers and designers sharing tongue-in-cheek comments on everyday absurdities has evolved into a powerful voice for democracy, critical thinking and civic engagement in one of South Asia’s most politically unstable regions.

Founded in 2017, Earki arose amid deep frustration and shrinking civic space in Bangladesh. Freedom of expression was under threat and political satire – once a vibrant part of Bengali culture – had nearly disappeared from mainstream media. Earki stepped into that gap, using humour not just to entertain but to question authority, challenge censorship and provide people with language for dissent. Earki was born from a very Bangladeshi instinct – to laugh even in the darkest times. When you make people laugh at power, you make them think differently about it.

Over the years, Earki has built a digital audience of millions on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube, creating content that combines sharp satire, investigative humour and political cartoons. But behind the satire is a serious mission: to defend freedom of expression and encourage responsible digital engagement in a society where misinformation and polarization are common.

Amplify Asia's role: Strengthening resilience and capacity

When Earki joined the Amplify Asia network early last year, the organization was at a critical turning point. It had the audience, creativity and cultural credibility, but needed stronger systems and strategic thinking to sustain its growth.

Amplify Asia provided exactly the support we needed: mentorship, training and peer-to-peer learning opportunities across the region. Through Amplify Asia, we have had the opportunity to connect with other independent media innovators from this region, learning how to adapt creative storytelling to civic challenges.

Amplify Asia's support has also helped Earki strengthen its organizational governance, enhance audience analytics and develop sustainable projects. This has enabled our team to plan long-term projects, expand editorial reach and create a more inclusive creative environment.

Amplify Asia didn't just provide us with resources; they gave us the confidence and structure to go beyond just surviving. They helped us see Earki as part of a bigger movement for democratic media in Asia.

Standing tall in a changing Bangladesh

In August 2024, Bangladesh experienced one of its most significant political shifts – the fall of a 15-year authoritarian regime following a massive citizen uprising. During that period, Earki's platform became a digital town square for satire, solidarity and civic discussion. While traditional media remained cautious, Earki's satirical pieces, memes and cartoons provided people with a way to express anger, grief and hope without fear.

This cartoon, by Mahatab Rashid, reflects the events during the July 2024 movement, when the student wing of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, carried out a violent attack on Dhaka University students which the former Prime Minister praised, rather than condemned. The cartoon, which went viral soon after Earki published it, captures this contradiction. The blood-covered, violent figure—depicted as a beast—symbolizes the attackers, while the hand reaching down from above represents approval and endorsement from power, communicating how violence was not only carried out but also legitimized.



Cartoon by Mahatab Rashid, published by Earki, 15 July, 2024.



Earki cartoon exhibition, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

However, the post-movement landscape brought new challenges. Bangladesh began its journey toward democratic reform. Earki responded with a cartoon and meme fellowship, an exhibition and participation in a civic platform called 'Voices for Reform' to show people how to get involved in this process.

This initiative combines online storytelling with offline workshops in small towns and universities, reaching audiences who rarely engage with independent media. The result has been not just engagement, but empowerment: thousands of young people learning to think critically and act responsibly online.

What makes Earki stand out

Earki's strength lies in its ability to use humour and satire as both a mirror and a shield, reflecting society's contradictions while safeguarding space for free speech. Unlike many media outlets that operate within rigid editorial hierarchies, Earki functions more like a creative lab. Writers, illustrators, meme makers, cartoonists and filmmakers collaborate flexibly, continually trying out new formats, ranging from fake news bulletins and parody interviews to animated satire and short films.

This approach has transformed Earki from purely a media outlet into a cultural phenomenon, blending the spirit of traditional Bengali humour magazines with the immediacy of social media. Its success has also motivated similar initiatives in the region, demonstrating that satire, when responsibly done, can be one of the most impactful tools for civic dialogue.

Looking Forward

As Earki looks toward 2026 and beyond, the organization's vision is clear: to become a regional hub for creative freedom, satire education and digital literacy. Our team plans to expand our fellowship program, create multimedia civic education content and build partnerships with schools, community centres and media innovators across Asia.

None of this would have been possible without Amplify Asia's partnership, which provided a sense of belonging to a wider ecosystem of independent storytellers determined to protect truth, creativity and laughter. Amplify Asia believed in the power of satire to change the world. That belief gave us the courage to keep going – even when it wasn't funny anymore.

From Faqcheck Lab to Suluh: The story of our evolution



Khalil Majeed, Project Director, Suluh

This is a story about making mistakes. Big ones, small ones and a few possibly catastrophic ones. It's also a story about finding opportunities in those mistakes, being self-critical and pivoting accordingly.

In August 2019, when Faqcheck Lab started, my business partner, Chan Tau Chou, a seasoned investigative journalist and communicator, came up with an idea that was ahead of its time: build inter-newsroom collaboration to boost capacity and combat the incoming wave of fake news.

We spoke to nearly a dozen Malaysian chief editors. Many liked the idea. I also met a bunch of enthusiastic academics and we started talking. Ideas began brewing. As we moved into December 2019, COVID-19 struck.

Suddenly, with the world in crisis, those newsrooms understandably had to shift their focus. The project stopped before it could begin.

This is where our first pivot happened. It hit us: If newsrooms didn't want to fact-check, the next best thing would be working with universities and their students, training them to fact-check and story tell.

In weeks, we signed up five university lecturers and a few dozen students. In January 2020, we launched Faqcheck Lab. For the next three years, we worked entirely remotely, training, managing and growing our knowledge base.



Fact checking training participants, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

We shaved training for students from three months to two weeks. Simplified processes. Adapted global standards to local stories. We even started training other fact-checking teams that were popping up.

Everything was funded by donors and ancillary projects, including training organizations to provide their staff fact-checking and storytelling. Our unique way of doing fact-checks had attracted attention. This involved finding the one critical "domino" narrative hidden in a sea of noise within fake news and, using journalistic interviews and deep research, debunking just that, causing the rest of the fake narrative to collapse.



Fact checking training, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

It made our fact-checks simple and easy to digest. We spoke at Google and we trained outgoing diplomats. We helped found JomCheck, the largest coalition of fact-checkers, academics and newsrooms in Malaysia that provided critical fact-checking

during multiple elections and countered the rising tide of misinformation.

But we weren't generating the necessary revenue to sustain ourselves. A couple of years in, we realised the dangers of donor reliance: it is neither sustainable nor predictable. We realised that the narrow definition of our skillset was hurting us. We were seen as being just about fact-checking.

This came to a peak in mid-2024 when, after months of work, we began marketing ourselves as Faqcheck, a new AI-powered solution for corporate clients. The idea was to offer them a predictive disinformation report, using our tech to forecast potential 'fake news' crises before they impacted their brand.

All this while we were still working on communications-driven projects. The money was decent, but we were still seen purely as fact-checkers and people didn't want to pay for a service they regarded as in the public interest, which should be free.

So, in March 2025, with MDIF in tow, we sat down and had one of the most honest meetings in Faqcheck's history.

I call this moment: "taking Faqcheck to the back of the barn and shooting it." We sat in a chilly boardroom gutting our past failures and successes. It was like therapy, but for the company. Eight hours in, we agreed that Faqcheck needed to evolve.

The biggest lesson? Don't be so attached to an idea that you refuse to let it go. You need to grab the opportunities that are right there, rather than stubbornly flailing a dead horse. It was an ego check. As a business owner, you must let that ego go. Making mistakes and adapting quickly is the whole game.

In the last three months, we've made our biggest pivot so far. Faqcheck evolved into Suluh.

The stories and content we produce online are now aimed at not only generating leads but also informing the various stakeholders we engage with, PR agencies and industries, about how best to communicate with purpose, both through us and with our partners in the journalism field.

It's this deep connection within the journalism sector that is key. We now develop deep, investigative and insightful industry reports as products to sell on our platform. We apply journalistic rigour to data to create something the market needs.

The plan is to invest the revenue from these products into funding journalism, fact-checking and media training – creating a sustainable engine that powers the public good.

Days after we began the pivot, we got our first major client.

So maybe Faqcheck isn't gone completely and there's still more to this story.

We want to thank everyone that's helped us, especially the Amplify Asia team and our coach Ai Lian, who've supported us through this daunting journey of reinvention.

Hazara Express News: Journalism through people



Momina Mindeel, MDIF consultant

Hazara Express News is an independent digital news platform from the Hazara division of Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in the northwestern region of the country. Founded by journalist Sher Afzal Gujjar, it is now in its seventh year. Before it was a newsroom, it was just a Facebook page and a hunch that journalism could look different. Sher Afzal launched the page in 2014, later handing it over to a colleague planning a regional daily.

By 2016, Sher Afzal was sensing a tectonic shift in the media landscape. At a press club event, he told fellow journalists that newspapers would soon be obsolete and that they should use Facebook and social media as reporting spaces. Everyone laughed, joking that Facebook users would now be journalists. Sher Afzal maintained that it was a real possibility, closer than they thought. He chose to lead by example, building a small news brand using his personal Facebook account. In 2018, the friend who had taken over the original page returned it. It took a few weeks to re-engage the audience, find a rhythm, and build momentum, but Sher Afzal succeeded in building an identity for the page.

At first, coverage focused on local accident reports or incident updates from the Hazara region. However, by late 2019, just before COVID-19, Hazara Express published a story about a disabled woman who opened a driving school after being abandoned by her husband following her paralysis. The story went viral, drawing thousands of new followers. Hazara Express hasn't looked back since.

A journalist for over two decades and fluent in four languages, Sher Afzal had worked across various regional outlets before starting Hazara Express. During COVID-19, he registered Hazara Express as a legal entity

against possible defamation or cybercrime; a crucial decision for surviving the digital transitions that followed. Around that time, a Japanese organization hired Hazara Express for a long-term promotional partnership focusing on the education work they were doing in the region. Although the revenue it brought in was small, the stability it brought was vital.

The newsroom was entirely run by volunteers. Sher Afzal and his colleagues began applying for media training, which led to Hazara Express winning a grant from DW Akademie, a German media development organization, under its Local Voices, Global Exchange initiative. Set up post-pandemic, this project connected resilient outlets from Pakistan, Serbia and Jordan for collaborative innovation. Hazara Express, one of three finalists from Pakistan, used the grant to train students at Hazara University in storytelling and video editing. Two of those students now work in big newsrooms, and one of them returned recently to mentor new interns under the Amplify Asia program.

Though the DW-funded project only lasted three months, it seeded a long-term vision. Hazara Express began experimenting with producing small commercial advertisements for local and diaspora-owned businesses, earning about PKR 20K (\$70) per ad. Combined with a grant secured through their non-profit arm, SEEK, these projects were enough to keep the lights on.

Partnering for stability and growth

Hazara Express joined Amplify Asia in 2024. At that point, only four of the 22 newspapers that had been operating in the Hazara region before COVID-19 were still publishing. The need for a resilient digital voice was clear, and Hazara Express was ready to rise to the challenge while remaining rooted in its ethos of telling stories through people, not about them.

Under the Amplify Asia program, the newsroom structured its operations around four core themes: skill development, content design/partnerships, revenue development and organizational strategy.



In-person coach meeting at Hazara Express, Mansehra, Kyber Paktunkhwa, Pakistan.

They hired two key staff – a video producer and a sales and marketing manager – and began working closely with a coach. Weekly sessions, including monthly in-person workshops, led to a nearly 50% improvement in their workflow.

Sher Afzal still volunteers at Hazara Express and supports himself through consultancies. The two new hires have redistributed the workload, allowing them to focus on brand identity and audience growth. After a YouTube strike in 2022 that demonetized their old channel, they started anew. The new channel has more than 700 subscribers and by the end of 2025, they were starting to monetize again. They have also already reached nearly 15,000 followers on TikTok.

After losing a \$20,000 Internews grant after a hosting scam broke their website, MDIF supported Hazara Express to rebuild it on a secure platform. The media has since introduced two successful long-term series: Unkahi and Hazara Faces (profiles of famous regional personalities).

Amplify Asia has also assisted Hazara Express to create a marketing strategy and plan, and today the media has mapped 150 regional businesses. It has seen an increase of more than 40% in marketing revenue since joining the program and an overall increase of 200% when including their new partnerships and other financial streams. Hazara Express now maintains partnerships with multiple departments at Hazara University, local NGOs, hospitals and the Chamber of Commerce.

A bottom-up approach

Sher Afzal believes no outlet can be sustainable unless it fulfills the needs of its community. This belief shapes Hazara Express's bottom-up approach, which gives space to people rather than speaking for them. They created a segment called Awaz-e-Khalq, their version of "Letters to the Editor", but enforced a strict verification process for every entry. They also offer free, press-conference-style coverage to aggrieved, disadvantaged parties, especially in cases of abuse of power or injustice.

Skills development remains central to their mission. Through Amplify Asia, the team has finally been able to launch their long-dreamed-of youth internship program. The first batch of young interns comprises five women and three men who are receiving hands-on training in data collection, verification and storytelling. This initiative is a win-win: the interns are developing new digital and analytical skills in a part of the country where access to such training is very rare – especially for women – while Hazara Express is benefiting from their output, which contributes directly to the newsroom's content pipeline.



Mentor working with Hazara Express interns.

Still, compromises exist. Sher Afzal admits that the tension with local advertisers, who sometimes expect immunity from criticism in exchange for business, tests their editorial independence. For now, however, he's proud of the dialogue Hazara Express has started in the community and notes the invaluable contacts made through Amplify Asia, in particular with the coaches and peers across South Asia.

Hazara Express recently published a story about a woman running a retirement home in Mansehra that reached hundreds of thousands of viewers, exemplifying what this media is trying to achieve: journalism through people, not just about them.

A life in media

*Nan Paw Gay, Director and Chief Editor,
Karen Information Center (KIC)*



I am a 54-year-old ethnic Karen woman and have been a journalist almost half my life.

My path to journalism was a winding one. Before becoming a journalist, I studied chemistry at university, worked as a teacher, a migrant worker, and an accountant, before moving to the Thai–Myanmar border in 2000 where I joined the Karen Information Centre (KIC). That’s when my journalism career started. And that is when I gave myself a Karen name, Nan Paw Gay. The meaning is “good flower”.



Nan Paw Gay, right, in 2005.

At that time, KIC was the information division of the Karen National Union (KNU), an Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO) representing the Karen ethnic minority. Six of us produced content for a monthly print magazine and a human rights newsletter.

In the beginning, except for a couple of short journalism courses, I learned my profession on the job, steadily honing my skills over several years. I also became a journalist myself, passing on my knowledge to others and some community based organizations.

I had to take a big step up in 2008, when I was asked to become, concurrently, KIC’s director and chief editor. I received no management or leadership training to prepare me for these roles so, once again, I had to learn by doing. Yet I never thought of giving up and, over the years, as KIC evolved into an independent news agency separate from the KNU, I learned more about the profession of journalism.

Major milestones after that included the launch of the KIC website in 2009, our first foray into the digital world. This changed our working dynamic fundamentally, as it required us to produce news daily for the website, while still struggling, often with inexperienced staff, to publish the monthly newsletter. Another important step came in 2013, during Myanmar's democratic transition, when we registered our monthly journal under the Ministry of Information which meant we could distribute our journal widely, with the help of Karen communities in Karen State, Mon State, Yangon Division, Irrawaddy Division, Bago Division and Tanintharyi Division.

This was a time of greater political stability, so we set up an office in Karen State – we had previously operated only on the Thai-Myanmar border. It was during this period that we joined MDIF's Myanmar Media Program (MMP), in 2018, and, for the first time, began to focus on generating income. Prior to this, as an ethnic media operating as an NGO, we had relied fully on donor funding. Taking a more business-minded approach represented a huge change in orientation for us, but MDIF worked closely with us, providing intensive business coaching that helped convince us that it was indeed possible to generate non-donor revenue without compromising editorial independence. For the first time, we were able to secure paid advertisements from local businesses.

But first COVID-19, and then the coup, created a whole new set of different challenges to overcome. KIC had to relocate back to the Thai-Myanmar border and contend with all sorts of additional threats to our safety and security while continuing to produce the news and information that our audience needed more than ever. Despite these obstacles we have been able to survive. And, in fact, since the coup, we have expanded our digital platforms and our audience size has increased, as has our digital revenue.

This hasn't been easy and, being a woman, it has come with additional challenges. I had married two years after arriving at the Thai-Myanmar border but was subjected to domestic violence during and after

pregnancy. I decided to divorce my husband, which left me to raise and educate my two children alone. I took them with me wherever I went to report, my children in one hand and my bags in the other. I ignored people who looked down upon me. I did whatever I had to do. In 2015 I married a man who understands and respects me as a good spouse.

I believe a key to KIC's survival has been leading by example. Working as a woman in the Myanmar media is not easy. Ours is a patriarchal society and there are few women in leading positions in the media sector. As a mother, I have had to make additional sacrifices to take on leadership roles, including giving up precious time with my children. But I am a hard worker, have learned lessons and sought opportunities, and have refused to give up. I am resilient and adaptable. I have had to ignore discrimination. I try to live honestly. I behave politely. I avoid hostile people. I am self-reliant.



Nan Paw Gay conducting an interview.

I'm proud that my counterparts have recognized my potential, and I have been honoured to have held multiple leadership roles over the years. This includes at Burma News International (BNI), the only ethnic media network in Myanmar, the Independent Press Council Myanmar (IPC), and the Karen Women's Organization. I have also received awards from community and international organizations.

Looking ahead, I hope for three things regarding the Myanmar media. First, the further development of journalism, for my ethnic group, for my society, and for my country. Second, I want people to have access to reliable information, and to use it beneficially. And third, I want everybody to appreciate the role of media and support them.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Grace Thu leads the implementation of all Amplify Asia program activities to strengthen the business capacity, sustainability, and resilience of independent media across South and Southeast Asia.

Tosca Santoso, MDIF coach

Tosca Santoso is a veteran Indonesian journalist who in 1999 founded the country's first national independent radio news agency, KBR. He has received numerous awards for his commitment to journalism and social change.

Pranaya Rana, Founding Editor,

Pranaya is a writer, editor and journalist based in Kathmandu, Nepal. He founded Kalam Weekly in 2024, before which he served as editor of The Record. Other positions include features and op-ed editor of The Kathmandu Post, and a reporter for Nepali Times.

Yulia Sri Perdani, Collaboration Director,

Yulia is an experienced Indonesian media professional who is Director of Collaboration at Project Multatuli where she leads partnerships with organizations and communities to produce impactful stories, interactive data projects, and multimedia content.

Jane Stageman, MDIF consultant

Jane is a gender and social inclusion advisor and coach. In recent years she has been working with over thirty civil society and media organisations across Myanmar, as well as others in Argentina and the UK.

Dávid Tvrdoň, MDIF coach

Over the past decade, David has worked in news media in his native Slovakia, primarily at SME.sk, one of the country's largest and most influential independent media outlets, specializing in distribution strategies and audience engagement.

Nan Khine May Zin, Senior Digital Specialist,

Nan Khine May Zin supports partner media organizations in strengthening their digital strategy, audience growth, digital platform monetization, and long-term digital revenue sustainability.

Simu Naser, Founder and Chief Editor,

Simu is the founder and editor of Earki.com, an online satirical news outlet. He has been a journalist and editor for more than two decades as well as being the author of multiple books and a blogger.

Khalil Majeed, Project Director,

Khalil Majeed is the co-founder and project director at Suluh (Faqcheck Network Sdn Bhd), a Malaysian intelligence and communications firm working with corporates, government, and civil society clients.

Momina Mindeel, MDIF consultant

Momina is a freelance writer and a media viability and development practitioner. This includes training journalists, conducting media analysis, and helping community and hyperlocal newsrooms think through viability, innovation, and audiences.

Nan Paw Gay, Director and Chief Editor,

Nan Paw Gay is the Director and Chief Editor of Karen Information Center (KIC). She is Co-founder and former Chair of the Independent Press Council Myanmar (IPCM), and former Chair of the Policy Affairs Committee of Burma News International (BNI).

ABOUT MDIF

Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF) is a not-for-profit impact investment fund specializing in the media sector. Since 1995, MDIF has invested \$340 million in 159 independent media companies in 50 countries where press freedom is under threat and access to reliable information is limited. Through these investments, MDIF supports independent media businesses to strengthen their financial sustainability while safeguarding their editorial independence.

From emerging information ventures to established media organizations, MDIF's clients operate across diverse markets, mediums and stages of development. This can include digital news portals, TV stations, journalism data tools, or AI-powered platforms that help audiences navigate complex and socially relevant information. What they all share is a dedication to providing high-quality, often award-winning, information for the public good.

In South and Southeast Asia, MDIF has invested in several independent media providing high-quality news and information to millions of people, often operating in very challenging environments. In addition to investment, MDIF has also been supporting smaller independent media through business capacity-building programs. Since 2015 in Myanmar and since 2019 across Southeast Asia and South Asia, MDIF has implemented specialist support through its Myanmar Media Program (MMP) and Amplify Asia program. Over the past decade, MDIF has worked closely with dozens of media across the region to help them expand their reach, strengthen their organizations, and improve their financial sustainability, enabling them to more effectively disseminate reliable public interest news and information to millions of people.

