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Journalism Research: From Broken Revenue Models to Embracing an “Open” Ethos

[Creative Commons](#) is an international non-profit organization dedicated to helping build and sustain a thriving commons of shared knowledge and culture. Together with an extensive member network and multiple partners, CC builds capacity, develops practical solutions, and advocates for better open sharing of knowledge and culture that serves the public interest. Our open work is centered in collaborative community processes and transparency.

By Jennryn Wetzler

Introduction

Journalism is a form of public service, critical to all of us. Unfettered access to verified information is essential for a healthy information ecosystem – essential for democracy. Yet, journalists face threats to their physical safety and online wellbeing, broken revenue models, the closures of local news outlets, and declining trust among readers. Misinformation and disinformation campaigns in the media challenge collective notions of ground truth. They also challenge the bedrock and meaning of an open internet.

Now is a critical time to support journalists in their efforts to provide verified information, investigate our shared challenges, and bring essential health, environmental, and political facts to everyone. While Creative Commons (CC) cannot address many of the challenges journalists face, we believe that principles and practices of an open internet can help journalists in *some* of their public interest work. From crowdsourcing information on open source platforms to using CC licenses to increase access to a particular story—applying open internet practices can help free the flow of critical information to empower journalists and citizens around the world. Before engaging, we needed to understand more about journalists’ challenges.

In this vein, we initiated the [Ground Truth in Open Internet](#) project to better understand journalists’ needs through global survey work, focus groups, Q&A discussions and training with journalists, activists

and nonprofit news sources. Below, we share methodology and findings from our research and engagement. We learned that journalists around the world face an uncertain future, as they transition away from an old model of funding journalism and face unprecedented challenges. Journalists voiced a need for training and support to harness open internet practices, but such effort must be balanced with new, working revenue models. **Most news organizations' current lack of a business model allowing for (1) open access to content and (2) stability and security for content producers obstructs quality journalism.** More work is needed to demonstrate how quality journalism can be funded, while keeping it accessible and open to people around the world.

Methodology

The project began with an international survey of over 500 journalists in seven countries and a series of five focus groups across 14 countries, which allowed us to explore some of the issues raised in more depth. Across both the poll and focus groups, we spoke to journalists operating in Brazil, Canada, Czech Republic, Egypt, France, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands, Nigeria, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Tanzania, United Kingdom, and the United States.



Map of focus group and survey participant countries

Survey participants were recruited independently by [Dynata](#). Our sample size of over 500 journalists allowed us to draw robust conclusions at a macro level, but given the small sample size in some territories, we had avoided using data from individual countries.

[Kempock&Co](#) ran five focus groups in a follow-up to our survey. Focus group participants were recruited via outreach with organizations representing journalists around the world. Respondents were then screened to ensure we could gather diverse perspectives, related to: gender, global region, experience level and position, as well as the form of journalism.

Key Findings

- While the internet has made some journalism tasks easier and more accessible, it's created new challenges ranging from abuse on social media to the disruption of the entire media business model.
- The disruption to local news media has damaged access to accurate information and made it more difficult to combat disinformation.
- The loss of local newspapers in many places has led to a disconnection between the public and journalists which has partly contributed to a decline in trust.
- The proliferation of paid-for content has been necessary to maintain the industry but has also resulted in new barriers to accessing news and information that could help to combat misinformation.
- A more sustainable model is needed for news media to thrive.

While there is no “silver bullet,” speakers participating in the webinar series created after the survey provided alternative models for sharing information as well as revenue generation. Journalists surveyed noted a need for greater access to openly licensed or public domain research, training on digital media literacy and community-driven open source platforms, peer-to-peer collaborations with other journalists as well as Creative Commons training.

Research and Discussion

The Internet's opportunities and challenges for Journalism

The internet has changed much about journalism over the past two decades – from the way stories are researched to the entire business model of the industry. For freelancers in particular, the internet has opened up new opportunities for work, meaning they are no longer restricted to finding work in their own country or through personal networks. There was also recognition among a number of participants that the expansion of high-quality online (and often open access) tools and data had led to the **creation of new forms of journalism**, such as data journalism, that had not existed two decades before.

Yet, survey respondents noted multiple barriers to providing quality and accessible journalism. Some – such as access to sufficient bandwidth – are challenges that could be easily solved with additional resources. Many, however, were major challenges to the institutions of journalism themselves.

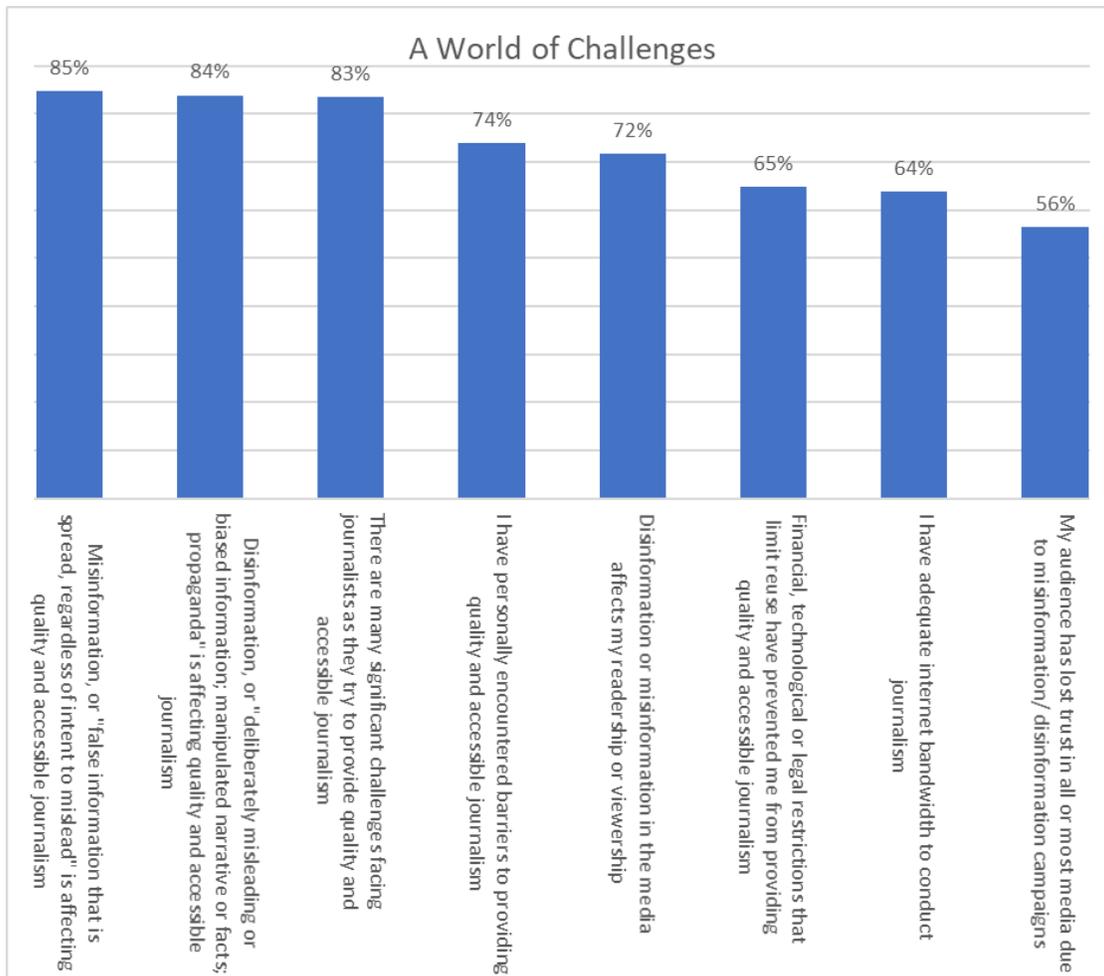


Figure 1: Percentage of survey respondents agreeing with statements listed.

Participants in focus groups raised four challenges in particular; misinformation and disinformation campaigns were the most wide spread. Other changes included, the proliferation of online abuse, loss of trust in journalism, and the increasing difficulty of making a living from journalism.

Misinformation and Disinformation

Over 80% of survey respondents agreed that both misinformation and disinformation were affecting accessible and quality journalism. In countries in the Global South this was disproportionately higher. Some focus group participants worked directly in the field of fact-checking and were engaged daily in attempts to counter incorrect information online. However, nearly all participants in all focus groups shared concerns about mis and disinformation.

Many participants, while in favor of lowering barriers to entry in journalism, also recognized that the ease of entry and fewer 'gatekeepers' meant that it was now easier to build a large audience while having limited editorial checks.

The suggested causes of misinformation and disinformation from participants were varied, with some suggesting it was not a new phenomenon, but rather a more accelerated version of something that has

existed for decades. Regardless, most participants agreed that the speed of the spread of misinformation was significant.

“WhatsApp is more difficult because it’s people in closed groups. So, if you’re not in those groups you’re not always seeing what’s going on. If you see things on Twitter or on Facebook or on Instagram or anything like that, it’s a little bit easier to monitor. There are closed groups, but it’s easier to see what’s getting passed around.” –South America focus group participant

Social media channels were raised as the key platforms for the spread of misinformation. However, there was growing awareness (particularly among participants in the Global South) that misinformation was being fuelled by closed groups, such as on Whatsapp or Messenger.

The journalists we spoke to were unanimous in their desire to fight misinformation and disinformation. However, some suggested that the need to maintain revenues had led some established media outlets to publish ‘clickbait’ – sensationalized stories to attract attention – which could fuel misinformation. The proliferation of ‘clickbait’ was seen to be largely driven by the highly competitive media market and the dwindling revenues that can be generated through traditional advertising. This is discussed in more detail later in this report.

“I think because the more people on your site, I think you’ll get more revenue. I think it’s a revenue thing. If you have more clicks more people would want to advertise on your page. It’s all about money. I think there’s striking a balance between upholding journalistic principles versus the revenue that you’ll get. I think that’s an issue.” – Participant in Africa focus group

The Proliferation of Online Abuse and the Loss of Trust in Journalism

Nearly half of surveyed journalists believed they or their colleagues lacked the necessary protections against physical attacks or to protect their own wellbeing. Nearly all focus group participants had faced abuse or harassment. This ranged from abusive messages sent online to physical attacks on their colleagues.

“I think clickbait is one of the biggest undoing of our media platform in Kenya. Because most of the time we want to pull audiences to our platforms, but this actually ends up costing us. Because I will clickbait you today and I will clickbait you tomorrow. But the next day already I’ll be losing their trust because you’ll know that I’m lying to you. And that’s one of the biggest undoing of our media platforms. The dangers of clickbait is that you lose the trust of the audience.” –Africa focus group participant

Many journalists feel “ground down” by the threats that are targeted at them and, in countries where violence can sometimes be a feature of political debate, some journalists spoke of their fear of being attacked and how that can have a chilling effect on public debates. The discussions concerning abuse were closely linked to discussions regarding the decrease in trust in journalism and traditional sources of news which were, in turn,

closely connected to the decline of local media.

Some participants made a connection between the lack of local media (and therefore locally well-known journalists) and the decline in trust in the media more generally.

The idea that the significant decline in local journalism has ultimately contributed to a more permissive environment for online abuse of journalists is worth more investigation. Focus group discussions highlighted that, like many local institutions that have closed, the local newspaper provided more than just news to the communities they served.

The Business Model of Journalism

According to discussions: the internet disrupted the traditional business model of journalism and broke it, in many parts of the world. The difficulty in creating revenue from journalism is not just a problem for

"They've got to do this [put content behind paywalls] in order to survive. But I don't know why, but for some reason I never made the connection with the disinformation issue and the fact that now those paywalls are essentially impeding people's ability to get the information they need in order to figure out who to believe. So, in a sense that is another one of these really weird Catch-22 situations, because I guess that you just can't win. You either put everything up there for free and we make not money, but everyone can have the information they need. Or you put up your paywall." – North America focus group participant

individual journalists. It presents significant challenges to investigative journalism (which often requires significant investment), impartiality and to providing scrutiny of government and decision-makers.

A recurring discussion theme related to peoples' need to make a living from

journalism. Our focus group discussions involved a mixture of freelancers, journalists working for major outlets and those working for small, community-based projects. All spoke of the challenges involved in trying to make a living from journalism and photojournalism.

Focus group participants voiced concerns that audiences believed all content on the internet was freely available, and people willing to write for free for 'exposure' challenge the available fee structures.

In many countries in the Global South, we were told that media outlets were relying on advertising income from the Government in order to fund their work. This brought into question editorial independence and the ability of journalists to pursue investigations without any fear of repercussions. This was reflected in our survey data, where participants in the

"It's difficult to get really meaningful information because the best articles, especially those from major media outlets, they are usually locked. And for people that are just accessing the internet, the average user, the information is just locked. So, we have an easier access to information because things are online, libraries, museums, archives are being made more available on the internet and this connects a lot with my work. But at the same time, the major media outlets are closing their websites. And I get that because they need to have money, and they need to have subscribers, but at the same time, it's just making the internet worse because I truly believe that this specific fact is causing a lot of the fake news and misinformation out there." – South America focus group participant

Global South were significantly more concerned about the lack of protections around the political independence of journalism.

The lack of revenues has led to many major news outlets putting content behind paywalls. While this is seen as necessary by some journalists (one described it as a “necessary evil”), there is also a recognition that paywalls reduce access to high quality and curated information which could be beneficial in tackling misinformation.

“Recently there’s been a trend in asking you to sign an indemnification clause, which basically says I take all responsibility for the content of this article...They [a major news outlet] would say, we’re going to publish this, but if somebody sues us for whatever is in the article, that’s on you and you have to pay for all the legal defence. Which is ridiculous because they’re this giant news organisation. They can hire armies of lawyers. I don’t have time to deal with that. I don’t have the revenue to deal with that. and there have been instances of rich people basically trying to ruin a journalist’s life by slapping them with frivolous lawsuits which even if they end up getting thrown out it still takes time and expense.” – Europe focus group participant

The push to reduce costs and to rely more heavily on freelance journalists has also meant that risks have been pushed away from major outlets towards individuals. This has been seen most acutely in relation to legal action. Many of the freelance participants spoke about the risks of legal action being taken against them and how the lack of support from major outlets has impeded their ability to do their work.

Our research indicates that the lack of a business model allowing (1) open access to content and (2) stability and security for content producers obstructs quality journalism. More work is needed to address how quality journalism can be funded, while still keeping it accessible and open to people around the world.

The need for training and support, harnessing the opportunities of an open internet

Journalists surveyed relayed their needs for training and support. In surveys and focus groups, participants noted a need for high quality and open data, and for open, freely accessible content.

Journalists surveyed also noted a need for training on digital media literacy and community-driven open source platforms, as well as peer-to-peer collaborations with other journalists (see figure below).

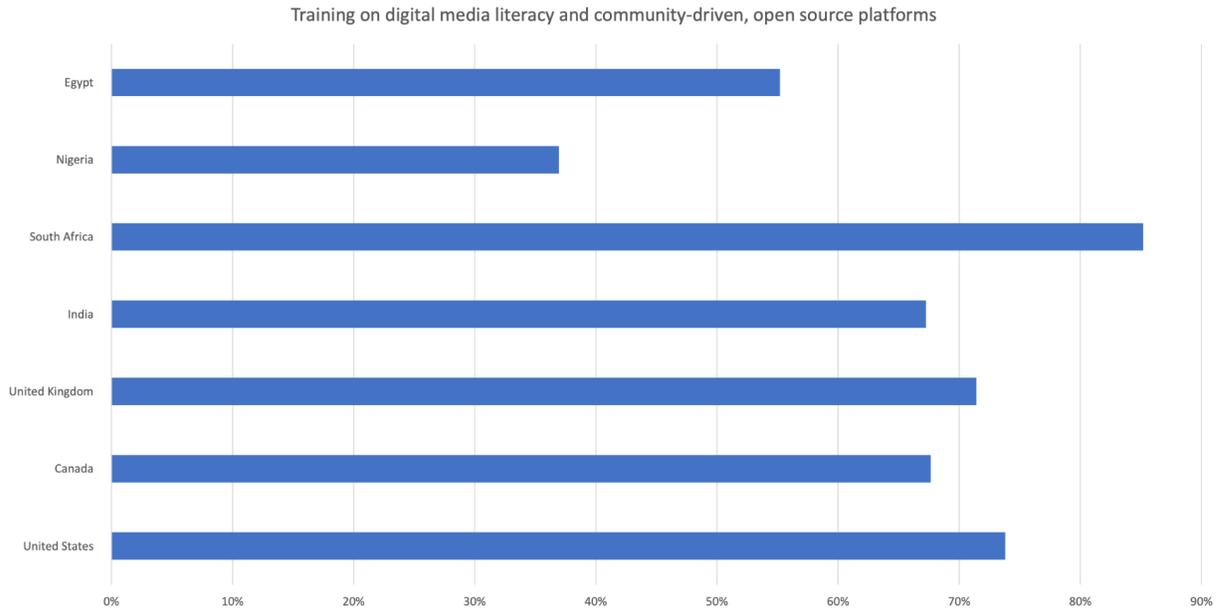


Figure 2. Chart of percentages of survey respondents who noted they would like particular trainings, based on country.

They acknowledged a general lack of understanding about traditional copyright, how it operates and is enforced. A total of 62% of survey respondents indicated that they would like to learn more about copyright. There is also a significant appetite for more access to openly licensed content and public domain research, indicating that there could be wide interest in Creative Commons licensed works.

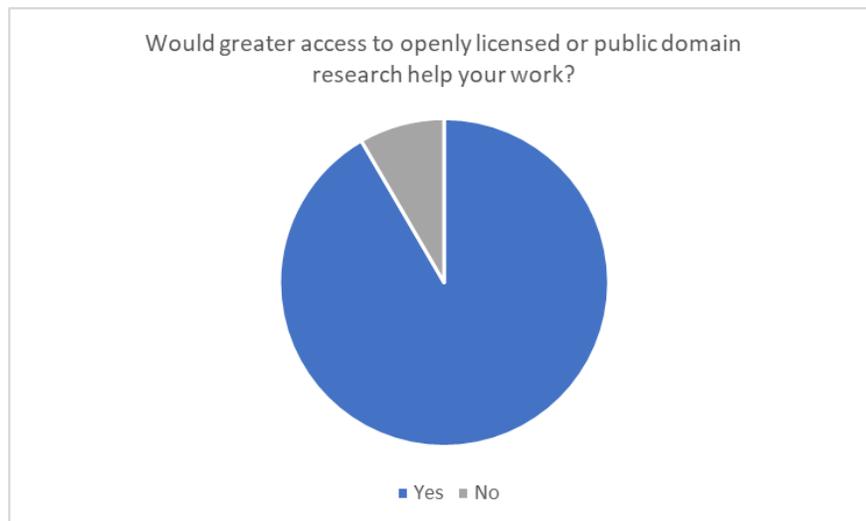


Figure 3: Pie chart of survey participants' responses

To address facets of training and the needs journalists identified in surveys and focus groups, Creative Commons developed a Q&A webinar series for journalists, activists and nonprofit newsgroups, which addressed new working models of information gathering, sharing and transparency. Speakers shared new revenue models for journalism, rooted in open licensing information, ways to crowdsource information for investigative journalists, and challenges to the ways we think of misinformation and disinformation campaigns online.

Speakers in the Creative Commons webinar series highlighted two alternative revenue models in particular, that worked for their organizations. These relied on foundation grants or institutional memberships. For example, [Cecília Oliviera](#), Investigative Journalist and founder of [Fogo Cruzado](#) noted Fogo Cruzado's use of Foundation grants; and Joel Abrams, Director of Digital Strategy and Outreach at [The Conversation](#) (US) noted that The Conversation's primary funding comes from a membership model with universities. Both of these alternative revenue models also rely on CC licenses to further the spread of their information. Joel Abrams noted: "Because of the CC licenses on our articles, 60% of authors get contacted by other media agencies [for additional stories]...Forty to 50% of our traffic is through republication. So by the Creative Commons [licenses] we are doubling our outreach."

Speakers highlighted their organizations and other organizations' priorities for open content in journalism and information sharing. In addition to [The Conversation](#) and [Fogo Cruzado](#), the webinar series gave a snapshot of other key organizations in our information landscape that use open licensing, such as: [the Centre for Internet and Society](#), [Propublica](#), [Meduza](#), [Meedan](#), and [Wikipedia](#).

On March 23, 2022, Creative Commons also hosted free online training for journalists from 10 countries: Ghana, Greece, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Russia, South Africa, Tanzania, UK, and the US. Several journalists were interested in ongoing collaboration, sharing their contact information with each other and many noted a need for open licensing and copyright support.

Next Steps

While the models explored in our webinars and training work well for the organizations we involved, we recognize there is no "silver bullet" or simple solution to the interrelated challenges journalists face. We *do* anticipate that alternative revenue models paired with open sharing of content, transparent, participatory processes and other open practices begin to address some of the interrelated challenges journalists face. And we will continue to explore avenues of collaboration, learning as well as training.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix

Creative Commons Training artifacts

[Recording](#)

[Powerpoint](#)

Creative Commons Webinars

[Recordings](#)

Journalism Research artifacts

[Survey data zip](#)

[Survey Tabs & Grid \(normal\)](#)

[Survey tabs & Grid \(% only\)](#)

[Africa focus group transcript](#)

[American focus group transcript](#)

[Asia focus group transcript](#)

[Europe focus group transcript](#)

[South America focus group transcript](#)