The Viability of Ethiopian News Media
Applying DW Akademie’s Media Viability Indicators (MVIs)

This study was financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development as part of DW Akademie’s Media Viability project with Mersa Media Institute.
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MERSA Media institute is a leading media think tank in Ethiopia that works to create a vibrant, responsible and independent media sector through research, capacity building and institutional support. MERSA believes free and independent media are lifelines to the development of peaceful, prosperous, and democratic societies.

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1. Introduction
1.1. Country profile
Ethiopia is an ancient country in the Horn of Africa with arguably over three thousand years of history. This makes the country one of the oldest civilizations in the world with one of the most important and strategic geopolitical locations. With a population of over 110 million, it is also one of the most ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse nations in the continent, albeit besieged with political and communal conflicts for most of its modern history. Despite having an abundance of natural resources and working age population, the legacy of its violent political background has seen very low economic progress and improvement of the lives of its citizens.

Despite being a low-income country, Ethiopia has a rapidly growing economy. In fact, it has been one of the fastest growing nations in Africa and the World in the past two decades. The capital city, Addis Ababa, is the seat of the African Union, which it hosted since the organization’s founding six decades ago. Due to its long-standing contribution to Pan-Africanism, Ethiopia still holds a central position in the continent as one of the most important diplomatic centers.

Surpassed only by Nigeria, Ethiopia stands out as the second most populous country in the continent with sizeable market and production potential. With GDP per capita of a little more than 1000 USD, Ethiopia is still a poor nation with a multitude of development challenges to overcome. Most of its current economic progress was initiated and achieved during the past three decades, where it has managed to realize an annual GDP growth rate of around 11% for the 15 consecutive years. As a result, the country has piqued the interest of foreign direct investment of varied types and sources, including that of emerging economies of the global east: China, India and Turkey.

1.2. An overview of Ethiopia’s news media
Despite Ethiopia’s sophisticated history and its position as a geopolitical force both in the Horn of Africa and the continent at large, the country’s News Media Sector is not as developed. Although News Media in the country can trace its roots back to the early 20th century when the nation opened up to foreign technology and ideas, independent media in Ethiopia has rather a very short-lived existence. The first commercial/independent news media outlet joined the local media scene only three decades ago.

However, public and state media institutions have existed for over 80 years in Ethiopia, and have a very strong reach and audience base around the country. Currently, the sector is made up of 478 Print, 55 Television (community included), 80 Radio (community included) and unknown number of online media outlets. Public media institutions are stronger and more viable than their private counterparts not only in terms of reach and audience size but also in
One of the most salient features of the private news media industry in Ethiopia is that it is city-centric and caters mostly to the literate audience - located, in particular, in the capital city Addis Ababa. This is primarily due to financial capacity limitations that media institutions face in terms of expanding their print or airwave reach to audiences nationwide.

Geographically speaking, the federal or national news media institutions are the largest both in number of media outlets and audience size. However, there are also media institutions which specifically cater to local news media audience, using local languages. These are mostly represented by the third broadcast media category - community radio stations - which are around 54 in total. Most community radio platforms are hosted and supported by federal higher learning institutions and distributed in different parts of the country, and local administrative bodies providing both the budget and organizational structure necessary to sustain their operations. Operationally speaking, local, regional and federal/national news outlets are can be put under the same basket in terms of the media viability challenges they face in the market.

### 1.3. An overview of media viability in Ethiopia

Ethiopia’s private media has always been volatile in terms of financial sustainability. However, there are a few viable institutions which have had a reliable source of income and a dependable revenue model for the most part of the three decades they were in existence. On the other hand, there were also many which were overcome by challenges and have quietly disappeared. Especially after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the independent news media in Ethiopia is thought to have taken a serious blow. Currently, most of the independent commercial media institutions are looking for alternative sustainable ways of raising revenue and fund their news operations around the country.
Nevertheless, news media viability challenges in Ethiopia are far more deep-rooted and structural than the COVID-19 crisis. In fact, the pandemic appears to be symptomatic of existing viability challenges pertinent to the news media in Ethiopia. For one, media revolution around the world, involving disruptions to news media technologies, appear to have arrived the Ethiopian shores only in recent years. Coupled with the COVID-19 crisis, the private news media is now starting to feel the pinch; the old media business model, based on commercial advertisement only, looks to be not a viable model anymore. Integration into the online platform has also been a challenge for most of the existing media institutions, both commercial and public.

In addition to the financial and technological challenges, the Ethiopian News Media is also severely affected by longstanding draconian laws and policies.

2. DWA’s Media Viability Indicators
2.1. Conceptual framework

The News Media Viability indicators of Deutsche Welle Akademie (DW Akademie) were born out of an extensive research and field work in search of a new approach to understanding and addressing evolving news media viability challenges that surfaced after the disruption of digital media technology around the world. The technological revolution has, among other things, sealed the fate of old news media revenue models, and with that, viability of the media as a business.

In response to that, media actors and stakeholders around the world started to look for alternative strategies to tackle the biggest challenge the media has faced since its inception. Among other things, extensive time and resources were invested in the area of media business model innovation and carving out new and sustainable revenue streams. However, there was just one obstacle facing media actors working on this challenge: it simply was not working out. The challenges were quite clearly manifesting in both legacy media outlets attempting to transition onto the technological era and those native to the online media system. The revenue coming out of the new media ecosystem was neither sufficient nor sustainable to support the mammoth news media industry that used to control a significant portion of the advertisement revenue.

To properly assess these challenges, DW Akademie began with definition of the problem and the approach taken to address it. It led to the realization that news media viability had been defined quite narrowly to be about financial sustainability; so is the solution, apparently, by focusing on fixing the financial side of the media business. This made a lot of sense in light of failure of the old media business model, since the latter is much more than finances and revenue; in fact, any working business model should be about the entire production, marketing, distribution and consumption of the product being offered.

Subsequently, DW Akademie redefined news media viability to be about three important and cross-cutting issues: financial sustainability; editorial independence and quality content/journalism. The three determinants are truly cross-cutting in the sense that the areas that need to be considered stretch over organizational, market and national level issues. This brought forth another gap in the ongoing media viability discussion, which is a glaring information/data shortage to understand the full picture on challenges...
of news media viability; and hence, the so called DWA News Media Viability Indicator (MVI) framework. In a nutshell, Media Viability Indicators (MVI) framework is a structured news media viability assessment tool that is fully adaptable for organizational level or national level assessment of information ecosystems in any country. It could also be an important common communication tool for media actors and stakeholders working on cracking the media viability puzzle in different contexts and systems. The MVI is organized in to five different dimensions: Politics, Economics, Community, Technology and Content/Expertise. Each dimension, in turn, is further disaggregated into 25 major indicators, and the indicators into another 109 sub-indicators to provide a full picture of the media viability situation of news media organizations, markets or ecosystems.

2.2 Methodology
The DW Akademie’s framework goes a little bit further than attaining conceptual clarity on media viability challenges; it is also aimed at creating common analytical language and frame of reference for actors and stakeholders tackling common challenges of media viability in different contexts and systems around the world. Accordingly, the MVI framework was adopted into a structured interview tool, complete with 108-page assessment guideline.

The guide can be accessed at: https://www.dw.com/downloads/53491005/mvimethodology.pdf
The interview material is designed in such a way that it requires respondents to score the specific sub-indicators under each indicator and reflect on the direct issues raised by the same. Interviewees are expected to rate the specific ideal situation captured by each sub-indicator, as it relates to news media viability, based on its similarity to the situation on the ground, on a scale of 4 to 1, in declining order of proximity to the sub-indicator. Accordingly, scoring “4” for a sub-indicator would mean that the sub-indicator “accurately describes the overall situation, supporting News Media Viability”, while scoring “1” would mean “the overall situation is effectively the opposite of what is described in the sub-indicator and is a serious obstacle to News Media Viability”. “0” represents a situation which is “not applicable” to the specific media environment in question.”

The study was conducted by interviewing 14 News Media experts in Ethiopia, carefully selected to bring knowledge and expertise on different aspects of the sector including, but not limited to, media policy and law, media business, media technology, editorial and journalism practice, journalism education and training.
From the beginning, the study team agreed that subjecting the respondents to full extensive coverage of the interview tool would be a futile effort since most of the respondents were likely to be reluctant to devote that kind of time to an exercise that does not offer financial compensation. Therefore, the team decided to break down the interview tool into five parts, according to five dimensions - politics, economic, community, technology, content and expertise - and identify dimension-specific expertise to deal with each of these five dimensions.

The individual scorings of each expert were then aggregated and averaged across the other experts interviewed for the same dimension to come up with a composite scoring or rating for each individual sub-indicator, indicator and dimension. Some of the questions included in the media viability assessment guidebook were also adapted to fit the Ethiopian news media environment. Some of them were also removed altogether from the interview material because they did not fit the existing news media conditions in Ethiopia, or were in one way or another covered by indicators and sub-indicators used in other parts of the study. Due to severe lack of data and reference materials, the study team also had to deal with some of the desktop research components of the survey by incorporating them in interviews with experts.

The surveyed expert group was composed of a wide variety of religious, social, economic, demographic and gender groups, all having relevant and extensive experience in the dimensions that they were earmarked for interview. The survey team, which was composed of two researchers, a lead researcher and one interviewer, strictly followed the semi-structured interview script provided by the assessment handbook. On average, each interview took a little more than an hour to complete. The final assessment report has leveraged more on the explanations and specific experiences shared by the interviewees to make better sense of the scoring and shed light on the current state of news media in Ethiopia and its future prospects.

3. Analysis of News Media Viability in Ethiopia through DW Akademie’s MVIs

DWA’s media viability framework maintains that viable news media organizations in the 21st century need to embody three different, and yet highly intertwined attributes: independence, professionalism, and financial success. Accordingly, news media institutions that do not have the editorial independence to produce high-quality journalistic content all the while staying financially sustainable cannot remain viable members of the news media ecosystem in any part of the world. However, maintaining these three news media attributes is often easier said than done because they are not mutually exclusive; they are rather highly interrelated.

To a large extent, editorial independence is a factor of financial independence and
sustainability, for financial dependency effectively means a compromised editorial independence in the context of news media. In the digital age of journalism, financial independence itself is conditional on audience loyalty, which in turn is not possible without high-quality content. Making the circle complete, we find quality content production to be highly reliant on the editorial independence of news media institutions. This is because, without independence, organized interest groups are always ready to hijack good journalism practices for their specific interests.

Therefore, the challenge of news media viability, as per DW Akademie’s conceptualization, is ensuring a virtuous circle of viability in support of news media organizations in the specific media ecosystem. Without supportive Political, Economic, Community, Technology and Content environments in the media space, the virtuous circle of media viability can easily turn into a vicious circle to the detriment of the news media sector. Accordingly, the Ethiopian news media ecosystem can be best described as a work-in-progress. The cumulative score of the MVI dimensions indicates that Ethiopia’s media environment fulfills half of the conditions required to foster a viable news media sector in the country. Some 50 percent of all the conditions necessary for news media viability, as measured by the indicators, are absent from the Ethiopian media system. News Media Viability results for Ethiopia is discussed in detail vis-à-vis each dimension, indicator and sub-indicator in the following sections.

3.1. Politics

Aggregate score: 10.37 (the maximum possible aggregate score for each dimension is 20)  
Average score: 2.07 (the maximum possible average score for each dimension is 4)

On legal and political front, Ethiopian media experts confirm all the fundamental laws, regulations and policies are more or less already adopted and codified. For instance, freedom of expression and access to information are constitutionally guaranteed and legally protected in Ethiopia. Between the constitution, the new media law and other proclamations, the text of the law contains more or less complete provisions to protect media freedoms. Nevertheless, the tendency of using well-intentioned laws to limit the rights and freedoms of the public and media could be the most formidable challenge to the viability of Ethiopian media in the post-reform period. Consequently,
Media experts have given high scores to the written laws and low and medium scores to enforcement.

The Ethiopian media sector is also among the most protected media sectors in the continent with zero foreign direct investment, strict media ownership and cross-ownership laws, and a series of other prohibitive and inconsistently applied laws and regulations, directly affecting the sector. The complete lack of foreign capital and expertise in the Ethiopian media had serious implications for the sector in terms of both financial sustainability and content quality.

Fees and taxes facing the media business in Ethiopia are, in general, reasonable and fairly comparable to other sectors, while the overall business environment is not generally supportive, if not discouraging, at times. For instance, the customs tax rates applicable to media equipment are exuberant since media equipment are treated as luxury goods up on entry into the country. Furthermore, most investment incentives and privileges are absent for the media business in Ethiopia; posing a challenge to the viability of news media institutions.

With regards to Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), infringements mostly do not even making it to the court system due to the low level of awareness of IPR rights. With the emergence of Ethiopia-focused online news aggregation and sharing platforms in great numbers, experts warn that weak IPR enforcement could be a serious news media viability problem in the near future, particularly in the digital space.

The state and the private media subsectors in Ethiopia have also had a trying relationship in the past. While there are ample legal provisions in Ethiopia, starting from the Constitution, defining the role of the media in democratic governance, the role of media within the society is not that supportive of news media viability. The practice of intimidating and threatening journalists, especially by government officials, is often witnessed. Although now free to operate, journalist safety advocacy CSOs, which were virtually non-existent until recently, are yet to sufficiently support the news media in the country.
3.1.1. Rule of Law/Freedom of Expression
Score: 1.0/2.71

Laws and Statutes
The 1995 Ethiopian constitution has dedicated one-third of its provisions to issues relating to democratic rights and freedoms. The right to freedom of expression and media freedom are among the rights guaranteed under the Ethiopian Constitution.

Since 2018, the Ethiopian media proclamation has gone through an extensive review process, and the revised proclamation was approved by the Ethiopian parliament on April 2021. The new law has taken freedom of expression and the media one step further by strengthening existing provisions and adding new ones, with the intention of redrawing the Ethiopian media landscape for the better.

Apart from media law, other proclamations like the anti-terror and the criminal code of Ethiopia also contained provisions that cut directly into the right to freedom of expression. This has been a bone of contention in the Ethiopian media for decades, until the revised media law more or less closed these loopholes.

It is the overall perception of the respondents that criminal and civil statutes in Ethiopia had largely been instruments of intimidation and silencing of critical voices. Defamation and libel laws were particularly harsh on journalists and voices of dissent in Ethiopia. Clear evidence for this is the criminalization of defamation as it applies to media and media practitioners. The penalties applicable for media defamation cases, which were quite serious, were a threat to the viability of news media organizations in the country.

A groundbreaking shift in the revised media law is the decriminalization of media related defamation. The new law has effectively repealed the provisions in the criminal code in this regard and relegated defamation to a civil suit. Furthermore, the penalties provided under the civil statute were also drawn up with due consideration to the financial viability of the news media in Ethiopia.

The anti-terror proclamation was also another criminal statute adopted as a tool for intimidating independent voices and the media. Before it was revised, a number of cases tried under the anti-terror proclamation were clear evidence of the intentions behind it.
controlling the media and journalists in Ethiopia. According to experts, the country's licensing and registration regime is composed of two distinct instruments offering varying degrees of control to regulatory authorities. Licensing, which involves the issuance of work permits based on a list of criteria and requirements, offers wide discretionary powers to authorities which enable them to control media institutions and their reporting. Issuance of work permit to operate implies the possibility of denial and it undermines freedom of the media indirectly.

Ethiopian media experts report that although officially, registration was adequate for media organizations to operate, the regulatory authority was creative in instituting a list of requirements that needed to be fulfilled before media organizations can be registered. Therefore, while it seemed like registration on surface, the media regulators in Ethiopia were in effect implementing an indirect control over the media and access to information. However, the new media law has eliminated this de facto licensing regime applied by the regulator, stripping the regulator off its discretionary power and controlling mechanism.

Enforcement
While rectifying the legal text is one thing, reigning in the overzealous regulatory culture in Ethiopian media seems to be a different challenge altogether. If there is one legacy left by past media and freedom of expression laws, it is an entrenched institutional culture of violating such rights. Experts believe that past media regulatory misadventures in Ethiopia, in one way or another, have to do with the enforcement of the law.

According to experts, the tendency of using well-intentioned laws to limit the rights and freedoms of the public and media could be the most critical challenge to the viability of Ethiopian media in the post-reform period; for it is difficult to unlearn decades-old institutional memory in a short time span.

For instance, scoring the sub-indicator “laws establishing rights to free expression are enforced on all platforms”, experts reflected optimism overall by assigning a score of 3.0. A much closer look at the scorings also reveals that experts felt much better about the written law establishing rights to free expression, which they scored quite high at 3.66. The same experts, however, were reserved when it comes to the enforcement aspect, scoring it 2.33. Nevertheless, some experts expressed hope regarding enforcement of both the revised and existing laws on account of the strong energy and commitment of the new administration to reform. One respondent summarized it as follows: “it is not only the legal revisions that give one hope, but attempts to overhaul institutions and introduce new and independent thinkers to the leadership of regulatory institutions”.

3.1.2. Access to Information
Score: 2.33
Access to information is a major stumbling block for quality journalism and by extension the viability of news media organizations in Ethiopia. A mix of challenges including gaps in the written law, enforcement practices and culture of
secrecy explain the severe information asymmetry that defines the media sector in Ethiopia.

Although access to information is a legally protected right of citizens in Ethiopia, it is among the most challenging issues in decision making at different levels of society. The country also has a unique legal approach where media is afforded special legal protection under the access to information proclamation, unlike the practice in many countries where media access to information is addressed separately in media laws.

The country’s access to information proclamation is among the media-related laws earmarked for reform by the new administration. Currently, the media law team has worked out the draft of the proclamation and is conducting stakeholder consultations. The existing law, as identified by the pre-drafting diagnostic study, has a number of gaps which, among other things, were responsible for the challenges that news media face in relation to access to information in Ethiopia.

Since the revision process is yet to be completed and the details of the amendments to be made are not known at this stage, the overall scoring of the access to information indicator is reflective of this information gap regarding the revision of the law. Hence, respondents scored the indicator at 2.33, indicating the overall situation with access to information is bad and is a problem for news media viability, where the optimism of those with knowledge of the revision process was evened out by those who scored the indicator based on the existing law. Once again, the written law came consistently on top vis-à-vis the enforcement practice.

Public relations

The access to information law requires government institutions to establish public relations (PR) departments and put in place professionals to execute their responsibility of providing access to information to the media and the public. In fact, the PR officers in government institutions are not only recognized as facilitators of information flow, or as publicity officers, but also as watchdogs of public interest, making sure that taxpayers are properly informed and they exercise their rights either through the media or other platforms. In recognition of this role, the law provides specific protections to PRs, should conditions arise where officers had to make a decision to inform the public against the interest of the institution they represent.

As facilitators and go-betweens, government PRs wield decisive power over the flow of information, which is a very important power in Ethiopia. In the current media environment, it is important to not only access information but to access it in a timely manner. This is because whoever has the information first gets to frame the message and shape the narrative, and this is directly linked to the viability of news media institutions in the country. Accordingly, respondents rate the sub-indicator regarding availability of government officials, including the information officers (PRs), at 2.17.
indicating the overall situation is bad and a problem for news media viability. The scoring here also shows a large variance between the written law and enforcement, the latter fetching relatively lower scorings.

Generally, PR officers preside over government hearings and press events in Ethiopia. Furthermore, it seems that most of them are not shy to play favorites among media institutions in exercising that power. The practice of selective inclusion of media houses and sometimes only granting exclusive access to public and quasi-public media organizations in press events is rampant in Ethiopia. When it comes to important announcements, private media organizations in the country are used to consuming second-hand information and recycled content. This is designed to enable government-trusted media institutions to frame issues and set agendas without competition. This severely undermines the relevance of private media organizations as credible sources of information and the viability of their content production process.

Considering the foregoing issues, respondents scored the sub-indicator as 2.5, effectively saying the overall situation is ok for news media viability but the signs are not hopeful for the future. Enforcement practices fetched lower scoring here as well, reflecting the experts’ opinion that enforcing access to information laws is a bigger challenge than the text of the law.

**Documents and data**

Accessing government documents and data, on the other hand, has been a challenge for Ethiopian media for many years. While specific laws and provisions exist with regard to access to government documents and data, gaps in timeframe and appropriate redressing mechanism are identified by experts as major loopholes in the law. The previous law, which is in the process of being revised at the moment, grants time allowance of up to 15 to 30 days for preparation of documents and data after they are requested. One respondent said: “in the current fast-moving news cycle, this timeframe is almost the same as denying access to information.”

According to experts, the absence of national secrecy laws governing the classification of secret information and clearance levels at different levels of the government structure is another quagmire for access to information. As it stands, there is no common standard for classification of information put in place by the state. The media and public are expected to navigate the access to information landscape on a case-by-case and agency-by-agency basis, where different government agencies could have different rules regarding classification of information. This leaves huge discretionary powers to the agencies in entertaining access to information requests.
The access to information law also lacks any complaint handling mechanism. The responsibility of the Office of the Ombudsman to oversee the implementation of the law was the closest thing to a complaint handling body in the access to information regime. This has had an impact on the enforcement of the law and has resulted in the reluctance of government officials to honor their responsibility to serve/inform the public. The poor scoring given to the sub-indicator at 1.83, which means that the overall situation in respect of access to documents and data is bad and is a problem for news media viability, is a clear indication of these challenges, which are evident not only on the enforcement side but in the written law as well.

3.1.3. Legal Equality
Score: 2.03
As much as the existence of the appropriate laws and regulations is important for a viable news media sector, the application of these laws on an equal and fair basis is also very critical. This is true particularly in respect of laws which regulate the media business environment, ownership structure, property right protection, and the overall investment climate in the industry. Ethiopian media experts believe that the news media in the country has silently suffered under generally unsupportive business and investment laws for many years. While the sector is not exactly prohibited from operating as business, the majority of investment and business regulation laws largely neglect its sector-specific needs. This is highly evident in the fact that media as an industry is routinely left out of any investment/business related incentives and support structures.

According experts, this cannot be a simple oversight since the news media tops the chart of highly regulated sectors in Ethiopia when it comes to foreign investment, media cross-ownership and the like. They also point out a series of unfair, biased and inconsistent application of laws and regulations directly affecting the news media sector. Accordingly, experts rate the legal equality indicator the lowest at 2.03, indicting the overall situation is bad and it is a problem for news media viability, identifying gaps in both the text and enforcement of the laws related to business, investment, ownership and copyright.

**Business regulation, taxation**

Media as business is a concept that remains elusive for government authorities and sector regulators in Ethiopia. Save recent dynamism around revenue generation, all public and quasi-public media institutions in Ethiopia are either recipients of regular budget allotment from state coffers or beneficiaries of financial resources set aside by the government/ruling party of the day.

A number of private media establishments are also heavily linked to political money and/or resources availed by other interest groups. Ownership structures and revenue streams are not transparent in the private media subsector; nevertheless, a significant number of private media organizations are run and operated as formal business and have well-known revenue models. For this subgroup, the overall business environment is not generally supportive, if not discouraging.

A nation that is open for business, Ethiopia has made noticeable strides in attracting investment with shiny incentive packages, complete with tax holidays and duty-free import privileges. However, most investment incentives and privileges seem to have overlooked the media business for decades. The private media subsector, according to experts, might even be among the few least supported sectors in the country. Respondents are also gloomy about business-related laws and their application on the Ethiopian media sector, which they reflected.

“Ethiopian media experts believe that the news media in the country has silently suffered under generally unsupportive business and investment laws for many years”
Concentration, foreign investment

Ethiopia has laws that limit conglomeration and monopoly in the media business, although market trends are not indicative of concentration. With strong theoretical justification centered on media pluralism, regulators of the Ethiopian media have long feared and worked to limit concentration in the sector. A vital instrument to ward off potential media concentration is laws regarding media ownership. While the law generally prohibits cross media ownership, selective enforcement has forced some media organizations to abandon their horizontal expansion plans. This was truly captured in the scoring of experts where they rated the sub-indicator on concentration and cross-ownership as 2.17, equivalent of saying the overall situation is bad and problematic for news media viability.

Foreign investment

Regulator’s fear of media concentration and declining pluralism is often cited as a justification for closing the sector down for foreign investment for so many years. Uniquely, the Ethiopian media establishment is exclusively owned and operated by domestic capital and expertise. Perhaps a legacy of its history as a nation in constant struggle with colonial and expansionist powers to preserve its independence, successive governments in Ethiopia have been suspicious of foreign ideas and involvement. The media, unfortunately, has always been suspected of peddling foreign ideology and...
masked interests. Being called a foreign agent, which is a tag often given to critical media and civil society organizations in Ethiopia, has some serious consequences.

According to experts, the complete lack of foreign capital and expertise in Ethiopian media has had serious implications for the sector in terms of both reach and content quality. Foreign direct investment is needed not only for the capital it can bring to the local market but also for the technical and managerial expertise it can introduce to the country in general, and specific sectors in particular. In this regard, the Ethiopian media has lagged behind significantly, even by Eastern African standards. Many respondents raised the case of Nation Media Group, an Eastern Africa-based media conglomerate that owns and operates multiple media outlets in the region, and its impact on the media industry in many of Ethiopia’s neighboring countries.

Although the idea of protecting an important sector like the media from any foreign involvement still has wide traction in Ethiopia, the newly passed media law looks to have departed from it. The new legislation has incorporated provisions that allow the involvement of foreign capital in the local media business, in joint venture format, where foreigners can contribute up to 24 percent of the equity capital.

Intellectual Property

The media business cannot work in general without proper legal protection for its intellectual property. Important prerequisite to good journalism is the ability to produce audience-centered original content. However, original content is expensive, and it requires financial and human resources to produce. Content producers, in turn, need to be compensated for their effort, if they are to continue their work as viable business enterprises.

In recent times, intellectual property is starting to emerge as an important issue to media organizations in Ethiopia. This, according to experts, is closely associated with the flourishing of new media. One of the new and innovative content packaging systems employed by new media is content aggregation. While it is a clever and convenient way of repackaging and selling media content, content aggregation remains to be an assault to the original content producers in Ethiopia, mostly composed of legacy media institutions. This is not surprising since the legacy media already had the resources necessary to produce original content. Therefore, it was a
3.1.4. Media within Society
Score: 2.30

The state and the private media subsector in Ethiopia have had a trying relationship. The state views critical and private media as having immense power which, if left unchecked, would most certainly lead to instability. And hence, mitigating this risk had been the primary driving factor for media regulators.

The private media, on the other hand, had been in resistance mode for decades, and viewed the government as an authoritarian group that enjoys monopoly of power. In line with the instrumentalist view of the private media, the government of Ethiopia has been seen using the media to build consensus, such as setting important national agendas and shaping and framing narratives.

However, according to experts, there are ample legal provisions in Ethiopia, starting from the Constitution, defining the societal role of the media in democratic governance. According to experts, the state both respects and denies the societal role of the media in Ethiopia. A respondent explains this as: “the government recognizes the societal role of the media on an issue-based, highly compartmentalized manner, as it chooses to involve the media only when the issue at hand requires it.”

The scoring of experts of the IPR sub-indicator at 2.5 is a reflection of their attitude that the overall situation is reasonable for news media viability since IPR laws are in place, but the signs are not hopeful for future as these laws are not enforced aggressively.

The optics as well plays an important role here. Since no democratic system is complete without a free and independent media, sometimes governments have to show respect to the media and its role to protect the image of the
nation before the global community. As far as respondents are concerned, the role of media within the society is not very supportive of news media viability and merits a score of 2.30, indicating the overall situation is bad and is a problem for news media viability. The main sub-indicator on government-media relation also fetched a score of 2.33 drawing on similar unfavorable assessment of its impact on news media viability.

**Threat, physical danger**
Labeling and tagging media organizations is still a wide-spread practice in the Ethiopian political environment. However, when it comes to the media’s relationship to the government, labeling is the least of its worries. For one, the practice of intimidating and threatening journalists, especially by government officials, is something that is common in Ethiopia.

While the legal text provides protection to journalists, the enforcement of the law leaves a lot to be desired. For instance, there is no legal provision that can serve as a deterrent to intimidation and threat coming from government officials. The fact that there is no separate legal protection in this regard specifically provided for journalists is another concern that is raised by experts.

Respondents score of the sub-indicator regarding government officials threatening the media, which is 2.33, is reflective of an assessment of the overall situation to be bad and a problem for news media viability. Apart from verbal threats, journalists and members of the media also face grave physical coercions while doing their jobs. In fact, according to experts, both state and non-state actors now pose a threat to journalists and media organizations. This sub-indicator as well is rated low at 2.0, indicating that the overall situation is bad and a problem for news media viability.

On the other hand, Ethiopia’s now repealed former civil society law has effectively decimated journalist safety and other form of advocacy in the country. Although Civil Society Organizations are now free to operate in the country, the contribution they make to the safety of journalists is yet to be seen. The respondents’ takes on the issue is not encouraging as well, reflected on their scoring of the sub-indicator at 1.83, overwhelmingly voting that the weak and fragile state of advocacy in the media sector is bad and a big problem for news media viability in the country.

“the role of media within the society is not very supportive of news media viability”

“In fact, according to experts, both state and non-state actors now pose a threat to journalists and media organizations”
3.2. Economics

Aggregate score: 11.71 (the maximum possible aggregate score for each dimension is 20)
Average score: 2.34 (the maximum possible average score for each dimension is 4)

Experts underscore that the country’s news media sector is largely in the pre-digital age, where the traditional media business model, which relies on commercial advertisement and program sponsorship, is still the modus operandi of most media businesses. Not only the media but advertisers as well are still struggling to come to terms with the digital revolution in Ethiopia. Commercial advertisement is still the only dependable source of revenue, with little to no revenue model diversification by the sector.

“advertisement is still the only dependable source of revenue, with little to no revenue model diversification by the sector”

However, the advertisement market is beset by challenges and most recently exacerbated since due to the global pandemic of COVID-19 and a ban on alcoholic drinks advertisement wiping out 60% of the revenue coming from commercial advertisement. Even public media outlets which operate on state-allocated budget felt this shock, requesting government for more financial leeway. On the other hand, online monetization opportunities remain largely untapped by media organizations in Ethiopia.

Foreign donors are not playing a major role in supporting news media organizations in Ethiopia. In addition, government advertisement has been a bone of contention among commercial media institutions in Ethiopia; the media feel that the government is playing favorites with tax-payer funded advertisement. Most of these advertisements are directed to public media outlets. Media is one of the few sectors in Ethiopia not entitled to incentives and privileges, including
accessing finance from formal institutions like banking and microfinance, that are offered to a wide variety of investments. The absence of FDI, venture capitalists and equity investors is also a serious handicap for the media sector in Ethiopia. The media market in Ethiopia is somewhat competitive. However, the economic barrier to entry for new comers to create and sustain media outlets is low. This suggests that the country’s media market is not saturated, but somewhat moderately competitive. With regard to media ownership, public media organizations are still the most widely consumed outlets in Ethiopia. This is due partly to their near monopoly of access to government-generated information and distribution infrastructure, making them an integral part of the media regiment among Ethiopians.

3.2.1. National Economy

Score: 1.0
Surpassed only by Nigeria, Ethiopia stands out as the second most populous country in the continent with sizeable market and production potential. With GDP per capita of a little more than 1000 USD, Ethiopia is still a poor nation with a multitude of development challenges to overcome. Most of its current economic progress was initiated and achieved during the past three decades, where it has managed to realize an annual GDP growth rate of 11% and above for 15 consecutive years. As a result, the country has piqued the interest of foreign direct investment of varied types and sources, including that of emerging economies of the global east: China, India and Turkey.

3.2.2. Financial Stability of News Media Organizations

Score: 2.93
When we speak of financial stability in media, the commercial media sector is the relevant point of reference in Ethiopia, since public media outlets have always been funded and operated by the government. With that in mind, when we look at the commercial media in Ethiopia, the financial stability of the sector has a very mixed picture.

According to Ethiopian media experts, FM radio stations are the most profitable commercial media outlets in the country. Among other things, low startup and running cost coupled with wider reach is a unique advantage to FM radio broadcasters in Ethiopia. Television, on the other hand, is a very challenging business. The logistical and technical requirements for setting up a TV station in Ethiopia are incredibly difficult to meet. It is usually years before television operations are able to break even and recover their investment cost. With regard to print, financial stability is something that is attained by very few outlets which have been in the business for decades. In fact, the print sub-industry is rather known for high volatility, with a number of print outlets coming and going unceremoniously.
In a nutshell, financial stability is about having a sustainable revenue model that can support news media operations going forward. In this regard, Ethiopia’s news media sector is largely in the pre-digital age, where traditional advertisement model that largely relies on commercial advertisement and program sponsorship is the primary revenue model ensuring the survival of the sector. Not only the media but the advertisers as well are still struggling to come to terms with the digital revolution.

Two unrelated occurrences have had a very profound effect on the status quo of local advertisement and media markets. The first is the ban on advertisement of alcoholic beverages, a sector which used to be among the biggest source of advertisement revenue for media. The second is the global COVID-19 pandemic which generally slowed down economic activities.

The highly competitive alcohol beverage industry, mainly composed of giant foreign-owned breweries, was a lifeline for most radio and television shows in Ethiopia. Before the media sector started to recuperate from the impact of this ban, the Ethiopian economy was once more hit hard by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Whereas the advertisement market was the first to tank, the news media industry began to feel the impact in a matter of a few months. Sector-wide estimates indicate as high as 60% decline in commercial advertisement by April 2020. Even public media outlets which operate on state allocated budget had to go back to the lawmaker to request for more financial leeway.

Online monetization opportunities remain largely untapped by both broadcast and print media organizations in Ethiopia. While radio is evaluated to be the least concerned with having strong online presence, both Television and print outlets have not done very well in terms of reaching the online audience and exploiting monetization opportunities. According to experts, TV stations are relatively better at consolidating their online presence by making their content available on YouTube. Although print outlets are also making efforts to make their content available online, they still have a long way to go before transitioning to online content production companies.

The survival of news media organizations in Ethiopia, without taking meaningful steps to diversify their source of revenue despite all the
challenges, is telling in itself of how dependable commercial advertisement has been to the sector. Largely driven by aggressive advertisers from select industries such as real estate, bottled water, non-alcoholic beverages, finance and banking, the advertisement market is still a dependable source of revenue for Ethiopian media. This means that the majority of non-public service broadcasters in Ethiopia survive without meaningful subsidy from government and/or donors in the media space. In fact, this is the most positive aspect of Ethiopia’s news media viability situation, which was scored at 4.00 by respondents showing supporting conditions for media viability.

3.2.3. Financial Independence of News Media Organizations

Score: 2.11

Finance is the most important way of constraining editorial independence in news media organizations. A news media organization which is not able to generate sustainable revenue stream or access financial capital from reliable institutional sources on the basis of market rules runs the risk of compromising the independence of its editorial/newsroom processes.

Factors affecting financial independence of news media organizations, as outlined by the DW Akademie MVI framework, include a diverse set of rules, market conditions and financial models. In the Ethiopian context, these include lack of access to finance from market-based institutional sources; no adequate laws governing subsidies and paid-public advertisement; lack of donor support and competitive advertisement markets (from the perspective of both advertisers and advertisement agencies).

Subsidies, paid-public advertisement and donor support

There are indications that access to government subsidy that takes the form of paid advertisement and Public Service Announcements (PSA’s) in Ethiopia is sometimes dependent on political affiliation. There is no legal framework that governs public-funded advertisement and its distribution among various media outlets. In this regard, even those in the commercial media subsector do need to have some sort of an affiliation to have access to government-funded advertisement, according to experts.

Although Ethiopia has laws protecting media from government interference and a media regulatory body, neither of them have resulted in improving the perception of the public regarding the independence of public media houses. The fact that the editorial policy of public media
institutions prioritizes the message of the government over that of the state has earned them the reputation of being propaganda tools and mouthpieces of government officials.

All respondents agree, unsurprisingly, that commercial media in Ethiopia enjoy a relatively better level of editorial independence vis-à-vis the public media. In fact, all respondents agree that there is no formal government subsidy to local non-public media outlets in Ethiopia. If there is anything that resembles government subsidy in this regard, it is the budget that is allocated to public media institutions.

With regard to donors, most of their engagement with Ethiopian media so far has been in the area of capacity building and project financing. Although there are not many long-term commitments in terms of financial support, most outlets receiving support from foreign organizations are not very transparent about the engagement. As a result, evaluating the independence of media houses supported by donors can be a tricky endeavor; particularly where outlets receiving financial aid and the amount of the support they get is not known. However, experts are of the opinion that foreign donors are not playing a major role in supporting news media organizations in Ethiopia.

That being the case, the overall advertisement market is still largely dominated by a few industries on the supply side: finance, real-estate, beverage and bottling, the airline and travel sector and a few others. While the market has so far sustained the sector, it is far from offering a diverse clientele for media houses.

“Although there are not many long-term commitments in terms of financial support, most outlets receiving support from foreign organizations are not very transparent”

“the majority of non-public service broadcasters in Ethiopia survive without meaningful subsidy from government and/or donors”

Nevertheless, respondents resoundingly state that editorial independence, in general, is not something that is openly and explicitly violated in the commercial media subsector. There is no explicit understanding that media houses would advocate openly and overtly for the business and political interests of their advertisers. However, we can see tactical influencing of content, perhaps by providing information exclusively to certain media partners. A respondent explains this as: “leverage over media houses would eventually influence how the story comes out.”

In the case of recognized media outlets, the commercial and political interest of the media owners is often the driving factor in their editorial decisions. “This might not always be so apparent to the public or even to journalists and editors working in these media houses.” These interests and relationships media owners have forged over the years can be incredibly complicated. How that affects the editorial process and editorial independence is not always clear.

The advertisement market
As discussed above, commercial advertisement is the only viable business model and dependable revenue stream in Ethiopian media.
3.2.4. Competition

Score: 2.77

The current media market in Ethiopia is moderately competitive for both audience attention and advertisement. According to media experts, a number of programs and shows in the broadcast media, for instance, are locked into a competition among one-another for the attention of the same audience group on the basis of their content, presentation and time slot. This moderate competition for audience attention also extends to the advertisement market. In this regard, although two shows may be completely different in terms of content, this difference in content would most likely not be reflected in the advertisement clientele they work with due to two reasons. One is the limited number of advertisers in Ethiopian media market. The other reason is, as commercial advertisement is the only viable revenue model in town, media outlets and shows cannot afford to overlook any of the active advertisers in the market.

Experts look up on market competition in the local media industry as being highly favorable to news media viability. In fact, the sub-indicator capturing market competition fetched one of the highest scores among the 119 sub-indicators.

Access to capital

Unfortunately, media is one of the few sectors in Ethiopia not entitled to incentives and privileges that are offered to a wide range of other sectors. This includes accessing finance from formal institutions like banks and microfinance institutions. Ethiopian media experts report that the basic problem is not that banks and formal financial institutions are not willing to provide credit to media institutions. The problem, instead, is that there are no structured financial products which are suitable for the media, and which define value based on the goodwill and credibility of media outlets instead of their physical or financial assets.

According to a respondent, valuation of media companies is particularly tricky in Ethiopia. This is because the country lacks structured capital markets where companies can bank on their market value and future revenue trajectories. Furthermore, the credit system in Ethiopia does not function without collateral, which is not easily accessible to media organizations. Another respondent argues “operating capital loans are also not available to media organizations since most of them do not have justified financial statements and they are usually operating under a deficit.” The absence of venture capitalists and equity investors is also a serious handicap for the media sector in Ethiopia.

“there are no structured financial products which are suitable for the media, and which define value based on the goodwill and credibility of media outlets instead of their physical or financial assets”

“operating capital loans are also not available to media organizations since most of them do not have justified financial statements and they are usually operating under deficit”

Media turnover

Setting up a new media organization in Ethiopia is an incredibly difficult undertaking. However, these challenges are yet to be a deterrent to new entrants as a number of new comers still manage to establish media outlets. This is suggestive of a media market that has not saturated, but somewhat moderately competitive.

However, the media industry in Ethiopia, and print media in particular, has been notoriously unstable over the years. Whether it is due to financial viability or political pressure or both, print media in Ethiopia have been very unsustainable. Through the years, a number of media pioneers have joined and left the sector.

Although the barrier to entry is somehow stiff in broadcast media (especially TV) as compared to...
print media, the track record of the broadcast media in terms of survival is significantly better, and those that manage to join do not leave the sector quickly. In general, the media sector in Ethiopia is not very stable, which experts perceived as posing moderate problems to media viability in the country.

3.2.5. Audience Demand

**Score: 3.12**

Radio is one of the oldest and most widely consumed media platforms in Ethiopia. This is strongly connected to the fact that radio is the most accessible to the mass, and still is the most trusted news and information source in the largely rural Ethiopia. In spite of its recent expansion, television follows radio as the most accessible platform in the country; whereas print is a distant third in addressing the information need of the wider public.

From the perspective of media ownership, public media organizations are still the most widely consumed outlets in Ethiopia. According to experts, public media viewership figures are bound to be high since it has near monopoly access to government-generated information and distribution infrastructure, making it an integral part of the media regiment among Ethiopians.

In general, there is a sizable audience for media products in Ethiopia. However, audience size varies from platform to platform and from outlet to outlet, even in the context of commercial/independent news media. Some audience research reports, for instance, estimate TV penetration rate in Ethiopia to be as high as 18 million. This is a figure one normally expects from two or three African countries combined. However, for a country of more than 110 million, this figure could be quite small. In absolute terms, however, it is undoubtedly an attractive audience figure for any advertiser.

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Media audience in Ethiopia is either not willing or can’t afford to pay for media content. Media experts consulted for this study are of the opinion that since the old media funding model does not really require the audience to make financial outlay to consume media products, the propensity to pay has not really been tested thus far. Paid media content is not really a thing in Ethiopia except for newspaper and magazine cover prices and very nominal TV tax. As part of the old business model, hardcopy sales – both street sales and subscription – are among the major revenue streams sustaining the print media industry in Ethiopia. However, steep and continuous rise in print cost and cover prices of publications has undermined this steady source of revenue across the print industry. Without commercial advertisement, no print outlet in Ethiopia would be able to sustain on sell of copies alone, let alone reap surplus from its operations.
On the other hand, recent interest shown by international and continental TV giants like DSTV and Canal + to take a piece of this audience market is said to be an indication of the importance of media audience in Ethiopia. In fact, a recent success story with DSTV in Ethiopia, which was able to shatter its sales expectations after rebranding its product, is a big indication that local audience is not only large but can also afford to pay for content. One expert argues: “If you look at soccer (premier league and the like) and how it is sold in the local market, and furthermore, the market for kids’ content like nickelodeon and upcoming Ethiopian tailored contents from multinational content providers, it is evidence that local audience is not only large but can also afford to pay for content.”

A respondent also pointed out that some of the most aggressive advertisers in the market and their executives are not really in the habit of basing their placement decisions on audience reach of media outlets. Rather, brand consideration for both advertisers and the media are the driving factor for most of the advertisement placements in commercial media. This entails advertisement companies being more watchful of the brand of the media they want to advertise on more than the audience profile they get access to through such media. One respondent said: “I feel like audience is at the bottom of the list of factors considered during advertisement decision making”. However, the situation is different when it comes to online media. Of late, advertisers are adapting into the practice of basing advertisement decisions on proper audience research and insights. This implies, in the context of online media, audience is actually becoming an attractive factor for advertisers.

3.3. Audience attitude and relationship to media

Aggregate score: 8.40 (the maximum possible aggregate score for each dimension is 20)
Average score: 1.68 (the maximum possible average score for each dimension is 4)
Audience has always been an integral part of the news media industry. Audience research and data has dictated the way news is covered and advertisement is placed in media outlets. Audience’s content rating, especially in the broadcast media, has played an important role in decision making and financial viability of the sector. With the onset of the digital revolution in media, the role of audience has become even more important, partly due to improved access to audience insight data and analytics. Freely available audience data has empowered highly targeted advertisement campaigns, inalienably linking financial success and viabilities of outlets to their audience retention. On the other hand, loyal media audience is not only badge of credibility and trustworthiness but also an important source of information for outlets.

Experts consulted for this study are of the opinion that the Ethiopian society has been the most divided it has ever been in the past few years. Ethiopia’s political transition in the past couple of years has been severely challenged by ethnic and religious divisions and deadly communal conflicts. The Ethiopian body politic is also currently characterized by the erosion of shared values and hyper-active ethnic rhetoric. Peaceful and democratic negotiations on some major issues are failing, and communities are increasingly turning to violence to address their issues. This is naturally affecting the way citizens consume news and information available to them.

3.3.1. Media & Information Literacy

Score: 1.00

In a nutshell, media literacy stands for a series of competency levels that the general public needs to have/acquire to be able to access, analyze, evaluate and create media content and make informed life decisions. These competency requirements are, in fact, dependent on a dynamic set of skills whose frontiers are constantly shifting with advances in technology. Critical thinking is the most important constant in this equation, and experts believe that citizens trained to think critically stand a better chance of catching up with the fast-paced progress seen in media in recent years.

As social media takes over other platforms as a primary source of news and information, the spread of misinformation and the rapid rise of information warfare are testing the resolve of societies and political orders across the world. It is said that the spread of misinformation at such an unprecedented speed would not have been possible had it not been for the lack of media and information literacy among various communities and societal groups.
In the Ethiopian context, media experts are in agreement that the nation’s education system is not built to produce critical thinkers. One expert argues: “The education system of the country fails to incorporate critical thinking as a subject matter to boost the judgment, evaluation and problem-solving abilities of students, starting from early age.” Another expert said “the system is not producing strong citizens who can analyze and consume information to solve the nation’s development challenges”.

The general public in Ethiopia lacks the basic skills and competency to utilize media and other information sources properly. Furthermore, experts report that with the exception of very few journalism programs in some public universities, media literacy trainings are not offered to students attending the Ethiopian schooling systems. One expert underscores that “even when offered, media literacy courses in Ethiopia’s higher education institutions are deeply underfunded with curriculums unfit to produce critical journalists”.

This puts the Ethiopian populous at a great disadvantage when it comes to analyzing the information it consumes and evaluating either the sources, or the various forces that shape information. One expert even questions the diversity of the information that the Ethiopian audience receives in the first place: “I don’t think the public in Ethiopia has access to diverse sources of information, both in terms of content and [language], let alone having the privileges of verifying.” The media outlets which are accessible in diverse local languages are owned and operated by the government, the expert continues to argue, and government sources are not exactly independent.

Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, all experts consulted for this survey are of the opinion that the Ethiopian society has been the most divided it has ever been in the last few years. One expert argues that “Ethiopia’s political transition in the past couple of years has been severely challenged by elements of ethnic and religious divisions and deadly communal conflicts.” The main difficulty, according to the same expert, is the erosion of shared values in the face of hyper-active ethnic rhetoric currently characterizing the Ethiopian body politic. The experts also observe that peaceful and democratic negotiations are failing regarding some major issues, as communities are increasingly turning to violence to address their issues.

### 3.3.2. Social Cohesion

**Score: 1.00**

The wellbeing and functionality of any society, and the inherent relationships that define that society, are bound to have a profound impact on the nature and performance of its institutions. Media is an important institution for the survival and progress of any society and its relationships. The way society is organized is also essential for the viability of its media sector.

Just as no two individuals are the same, communities and groups making up any society are also quite diverse. However, what makes a society a society is the fact that its members, in spite of their differences, still have enough shared values to negotiate common rules and regulations to play by. As such, peaceful and democratic negotiation, which is the key to dealing with common challenges, is a direct product of societal cohesion.
This naturally affects the way citizens consume news and information available to them. According to the experts, ethnic and religious cracks that are establishing roots in Ethiopia society are obviously carving out their own media and information consumption habits. One expert argues: “Most citizens follow the media outlets that they believe to represent their ethnic group’s interest or political view. They rarely consume information from outlets having impartial/opposing points of view.” An important exception in this regard, according to experts, is that public broadcast media is still the single most important source of information and news in Ethiopia. Whether it is for its wider reach or its arguable impartiality as far as ethnic politics is concerned, public media still binds most audiences in Ethiopia as a primary source of information. However, although public media has an established demand/monopoly in the Ethiopian news/information market, the quality of journalism and its coverage leaves a lot to be desired.

Experts observed that in the context of the current political architecture, which is dominated by ethnic, political and religious affiliations, the reporting done by public broadcast media outlets might just be the most impartial at least with regards to those narratives. One expert sums it up elegantly: “It is all about levels; and it is contextual. However, as far as impartial news coverage and diverse perspectives are concerned, in the true sense of these terms, the Ethiopian media audience is still severely underserved.”

3.3.3. News Media Trust & Credibility

Score: 1.90

Media provides a very unique product – a product whose quality can only be verified by its long-term trust and credibility. News media audiences rely on the track record of outlets to trust the reporting they consume. That is why experts say credibility in news media is a valuable currency. This might as well be literally true, since credibility directly translates to loyalty and willingness to buy content or financially support media institutions.

Experts claim that in Ethiopia, trust and credibility is found distributed among various platforms and outlets, including public broadcasters, depending on issues and subject matters. One expert said that “while information and news is highly skewed towards ethnic, religious and other points of political views in Ethiopia, the trust of the public at the same time is apportioned based on various issues.” For example, whereas public outlets enjoy some level of credibility in the area of government owned information, news and announcements, the independent media and the online outlets including social media have better credibility and trust in some other areas, such as “exposing the government’s wrongdoings”.

Partly due to fact that there are not strong and credible media and partly due to media partisanship and ethnic affiliation in Ethiopia, public opinion regarding the media sector in general is not very high. One expert argues that “if you consider media institutions that came after the reform, most of them are either nationalist or have a strong link to politics or political forces. The rise of the media in this period went in line with development of the politics of the country.
Most of these nationalist media institutions followed hyperactive political environment rife with ethnic rhetoric. And most of them were formed to counteract one-another."

Ethiopian media experts are of the view that Ethiopian media audience is more loyal to entertainment media than hardcore news media outlets. In this regard, an expert said that “the public is more interested in entertainment content and, as such, entertainment media with typical entertainment content are the ones that might command loyalty from their followers. Even within the context of the entertainment media, the public is far from being loyal to platforms.”

When it comes to the audience defending the media, experts believe that Ethiopian media audiences might not currently rally in defense of contemporary media outlets. Experts also recall Ethiopian public reacting in defense of some outlets and journalists working in print news media sub-industry in the past. One expert reminisced: “We did see unwavering audience support to some journalists who were imprisoned by the government in the past. Is it a support that can be counted on is another question altogether since counter-narratives on imprisoned journalists have been seen to be successful to tame down public pressure.”

There are also experts who see current political conditions damaging this relationship significantly. They argue that the public might have rallied behind the media in the past when it was all about government against independent media, but now that most political rhetoric is dominated by ethnic and religious affiliations, the potential threat to the industry is also coming from the public. One expert said that “journalists are facing threats from different parties including the public. If a media outlet or a journalist covers a news story and it is not liked by some part of the public, people would attack or harass them siding with the government.”

3.3.4. Participation

Score: 2.50
Innovation in media technology has enabled the news media audience to have better access and control over the news content it consumes. Thanks to social media, this shift has created opportunities for media organizations to expand their limited news production resources by tapping into user-generated content.

User-generated content can directly contribute to news gathering and verification since users are on the ground where incidents happen, well-placed to provide eyewitness accounts. In fact, with the budding field of citizen journalism, users can now make contributions to news media content on a regular basis. Audience participation in the news production process can also manifest through comments, discussions and reactions to content, as well as sharing content on social media and sparking debates among users.

According to Ethiopian media experts, the country’s news media industry is not really new to the concept of audience participation, with engagement platforms active and working across all mediums for as long as the sector existed. However, when it comes to harnessing the engagement to improve the final product, experts seem to have reservations.
With regard to online and social media-based news outlets, experts agree that the platforms themselves are well-suited for audience engagement and encourage audiences to freely submit comments, thoughts and ideas. This may be due to the business model of online media platforms, which is almost entirely dependent on audience engagement and participation. One expert is of the view that audience engagement has always been a little different in the print media subsector in Ethiopia. While maintaining similar engagement platforms like mailing addresses and telephone numbers and text lines, she argues, print has been the weakest in audience engagement. In this regard, she noted that “especially with the media discourse increasingly becoming partisan, print outlets have been a bit uneasy about engagement. They fear push back and controversy and labeling on the content they provide”.

Media experts are unanimous that social media is where many important national issues are discussed and debated, agendas are set and debates are ignited. They are also in agreement that news media contents are widely shared on social media and that some stories end up sparking important national debates. In this regard, an expert has noted that “while the news media still have the power to set agendas and spark a national debate on social media, this power is now being shared by non-news media content developers”. Another expert also said that “news media content is not dominant on social media trends, and discussions with a number of social media personalities and influencers attract the attention of the majority active users”.

With regard to citizen journalism, experts acknowledge the role of citizen journalists/activists in informing their communities and the wider public with up-to-date and firsthand information. However, they are of the view that citizen journalists/activists lack the credibility and have questionable practices in terms of objectivity and impartiality. One expert said that citizen journalism and social/political activism appears to be jumbled up in the minds of both the practitioners and their audiences.

When it comes to collaboration between the mainstream and citizen media, experts state that they exist as two separate islands with limited crossovers and cooperation. Apart from a few mainstream media institutions actively working with citizen journalists by hosting their content and using the work of citizen journalists as input for news, there is a noticeable divide between the two brands of journalism in Ethiopia. According one expert, the reasons for this disconnect include the mainstream media’s strong belief that content coming from citizen journalists does not meet professional and ethical standards, lack of commitment from citizen journalists to provide continuous supply of content due to incentive problems, and the strong tendency of media outlets’ to develop and rely on in-house content alone.
3.3.5. Audience Data

Score: 2.0

The hallmark of the legacy media is its near absolute control over its platforms and the way news is covered and analyzed. News media audiences in those days had limited choice between the existing media content producers. As such, the news media did not have to lose sleep over what sort of news content the audience wanted but the comparative quality of its coverage vis-à-vis its competitors. With the opening up of media technologies, however, the concept of competition for the news media saw an unprecedented level of disruption. News media technologies have made it possible for anybody with a cellular phone or a similar device to potentially become a competition for news media organizations. With that, the audience has gained the power to dictate its preference with regard to news coverage. As a result, the news media industry had no choice but to cater to the news audience and actually identify what, when, how and where the audience wants its news.

This brought to the surface new challenges such as audience research, data and analytics. Today, audience data availability, validity and accessibility are directly linked to the viability of news media organizations. While quality audience data is one thing, the expertise to analyze and extract actionable intelligence from it is a completely different challenge. Depending on the capacity for analytics, audience data could be a useful tool to guide content production/editorial processes for maximum audience satisfaction as well as a valuable resource for marketing and sales teams.

Access to audience data

Ethiopian media experts appear to be unanimous in their observation that audience data and research is a very scarce commodity in the Ethiopian news media sector. The main challenge, according to one expert, is the weakness of the data and research market in Ethiopia, especially on the supply side. In this regard, he argues that “audience research, both on broadcast and print outlets, has been very scarce in Ethiopia’s media in the past. There are very few research institutions doing this work in an organized manner. Therefore, such services are not readily available to the news media in the market.” However, the expert also maintains that it is questionable if the demand for such products, i.e. the willingness and ability to pay for audience research outputs, is present in the Ethiopian news media sector, which has been struggling financially for decades.

“Data availability, validity and accessibility are directly linked to the viability of news media organizations”

“Audience research, both on broadcast and print outlets, has been very scarce in Ethiopia’s media in the past. There are very few research institutions doing this work in an organized manner”

Another expert also stated that “media organizations do not have the experience and culture of gathering and analyzing audience data. They also do not have the means and mechanisms for collecting audience information.” She also underscored that even when audience research services are available in the market, it is usually way beyond the financial capacity of media organizations to enlist such professional support. Ethiopian media experts also report that a few news media organizations have tried to conduct audience research in the past using their in-house capacity with varying degrees of success. One expert confirms this: “some media organizations have tried to do their own audience assessments, but most of them have been researching the overall media audience,
not media-specific audiences.” According to the expert, this is largely because research requires resources and the news media in Ethiopia does not have the financial capacity to commit to such an endeavor.

Experts agree that the new media, social media in particular, seem to be taking advantage of the inbuilt media audience research and insight tools to know more about their audience, and that such tools, if used the right way, are quite reliable sources of audience insight. One expert opines: “although inbuilt audience data and insight mechanisms are contributing to the improvement of access to reliable audience data, making proper analysis and extracting actionable outputs is another issue altogether”. Experts are of the view that this lack of data-driven decision-making process is exacerbated by serious lack of professional staff skilled in data analysis and interpretation. According to one expert, “whereas news media teams in Ethiopia in general are extremely understaffed, those who can afford to hire focus on strengthening editorial teams than support staff”.

At the end of the day, the lack of audience data and analytics appears to have crippled the country’s news media sector severely from clearly identifying and catering to its target audience, experts conclude. According to experts, this lack of critical expertise might just be one of the most difficult media viability challenges in Ethiopia.

3.4. Technology

Aggregate score: 9.1 (the maximum possible aggregate score for each dimension is 20)
Average score: 1.82 (the maximum possible average score for each dimension is 4)

In this digital age of media and news production, the challenge of adapting into the new and technology-intensive content distribution platforms in itself is the fundamental obstacle to news media viability. Distribution platforms as well as the news production process and technology have transformed quite significantly.
If the news media is to stay a viable business enterprise, it needs to make the necessary investment on technological resources with the aim of transforming its news production process to meet the quality requirements of the digital-age content consumer. In addition, the skills aspect of upgrading the production process is also very critical. In this regard, media organizations need to have the expertise to make use of technological hardware and software needed for news production and optimize it when required.

3.4.1. Production and Distribution Resources

Score: 1.75

In the past decade or so, Ethiopia has made strides in building its Information Communication Technology (ICT) infrastructure and overall digitization process. Internet connectivity has grown by leaps and bounds, improving access to the wider public. A little more than 50 million subscribers are reported to have access to mobile phones. Internet connectivity across the country with 3G and 4G connections is expanding to most regional towns and business centers. However, the country is far from ensuring universal access to basic ICT infrastructure, and most of its rural community (which accounts for the majority of the country’s population) still remains unplugged. Those in urban areas also struggle with quality and reliability of ICT services.

While the country’s infrastructure has grown exponentially, its capacity of manufacturing ICT implements leave a lot to be desired. Industries, including the news media, are heavily reliant on imported technological equipment, which does not seem to have a structured domestic market. Media experts report that the lack of established market for technological resources has resulted in unreliable supply, unstable prices and unpredictable demand for technological products. This obviously is a huge challenge for news media startups and those in transition to digital content production.

Most of the materials needed for production and distribution of digital content like cameras,
microphones, sound mixers, and even mobile phones capable of taking quality videos, are either unavailable in the local market or extremely expensive. According to a respondent, the customs duty and other taxes applicable to imported technological devices add up to exorbitant amounts. On top of that, one has to face incredible difficulties to clear such equipment through Ethiopian customs.

“Most of the materials needed for production and distribution of digital content like cameras, microphones, sound mixers, and even mobile phones capable of taking quality videos, are either unavailable in the local market or extremely expensive”

In addition, there are also challenges related to lack of electronic payment systems. One respondent explained that the challenge “is not just about affordability but means of payment as well since there is no electronic payment system that can interface with global payment mechanisms.” In recent times, there are attempts to introduce mobile money to the local market, with telebirr standing out as a major one. But electronic payment systems are not only at an infant stage in the country, but also very limited that they are only available in some areas.

3.4.2. News Media Organizations’ Access to Technology

Score: 2.11

Due to structural market failures like unreliable supply and unstable prices, media houses in Ethiopia have limited access to physical technological resources required for news production. Imported cameras, transmitters and other media equipment are usually treated as luxury products, and hence risk falling in to high excise tax brackets. This has been very discouraging not only for the media houses but also for the film industry. Media experts interviewed for this survey are inclined to believe that the authorities in charge of issuing import permits for media equipment are highly influenced by politics. One expert stated; “we have seen this with the import permits given to commercial broadcasters; it is influenced by their political ideology and expected editorial policy and practice.”

On the other hand, whereas access to news media distribution channels should be an open and transparent process based on technical and financial competence alone, accusation of favoritism and political consideration in the issuance of access to such channels is very rampant in Ethiopia. According to an Ethiopian media expert, the practice is certainly not transparent enough to say it is apolitical. The expert added that “although many startups apply for radio and television frequencies, only a few of them get it, and the selection process is, at times, accused of having political bias.”

With regard to digital distribution channels, the main issue seems to be government monopoly over it and with that, risk of political consideration in obtaining access. Media experts are divided on the issue of fairness and equitable access to distribution channels. On the one hand, media experts argue that access to distribution channels is largely equitable and fair but limited in coverage. On the other hand, they say access to digital distribution channels could not be equitable and fair since it is unaffordable for media houses in Ethiopia.

“media experts argue that access to distribution channels is largely equitable and fair but limited in coverage”
3.4.3. Audience Access to Technology

Score: 1.83
Ethiopia has really stepped up its investment in technological infrastructure in the past decade. Billions of dollars’ worth telecom infrastructure contracts, financed and built by the Chinese, has taken connectivity around Ethiopia many steps further, expanding mobile voice and data services to the farthest corners of the country. This has laid the groundwork for audience access to media technologies, but it is still far from universal coverage. In addition, quality and affordability of the technology is another obstacle for news media audience in Ethiopia. For instance, Ethiopia has one of the highest data rates, even by African standards. In fact, many people do not watch videos and news on their mobile data plans unless they have access to unlimited broadband internet connection, which is mostly only affordable to institutional customers in Ethiopia at the moment.

According to experts, as far as the rural community is concerned, the most accessible media content receiver technology is still radio, and anything other than that is unaffordable, if not inaccessible. In urban areas, although the average income of many people is not flexible enough to buy newspapers and/or satellite receivers, there are a considerable number of people who can afford and have access to a wide variety of content receiver technologies. One respondent asserted that “the urban story is definitely better both in terms of access and affording media receiver technologies, including mobile phones. But this is not a good indicator for the overall population. Receiver technologies are basically too expensive for the majority of Ethiopians, and they cannot afford to pay for internet service or TV receivers.”

However, cheap Chinese technology is also playing a major role in helping the vast rural community of Ethiopia have access to at least one media receiver technology – usually radio or television. Mobile phone devices like Techno, Smadle and other locally branded Chinese devices, most of which are assembled in Ethiopia, are not only really cheap and accessible to the rural community but are also widely used to listen to the radio. Nevertheless, audience access to technology is generally a serious obstacle to viability for Ethiopia’s news media market.

3.4.4. Digital Expertise

Score: 1.91
While access to basic production and distribution technology is important for the news media industry in this digital age, the skillset to utilize and optimize the technology is even more critical to ensure the viability of its operation. Accordingly, digital expertise is one of the vital resources for news media organizations.

Expertise is certainly in low supply in Ethiopian digital news media. Ethiopian media experts are certain that the poor state that most Ethiopian news media websites are found in is a clear indication of lack of attention to digital expertise on the side of the media organizations. One respondent noted how some news media outlets based in Ethiopia fail to even have a proper website. Even with outlets having websites, regularly maintained and optimized pages are a rarity. Many news
media organizations in Ethiopia do not have the expertise to maintain and optimize their web-based platforms. According to experts, this could be because financial capacity to hire tech-support could be a challenge for media organizations in Ethiopia.

Furthermore, cyber security does not seem to be a concern for most media organizations in Ethiopia. Experts are of the view that even bigger media houses in Ethiopia usually have one or two experts to manage their websites and social media pages; they certainly cannot spare professionals to stand guard of their online assets. The saving grace, according to a respondent, is that oftentimes, the media houses customize and use internationally built platforms, so this has minimized the risk of cyber-attack.

On the other hand, the journalist community in Ethiopia is yet to acquire the basics of digital journalism let alone keeping up with the latest in terms of technological advancement. Adapting to digital news platforms is not the strength of Ethiopian journalists. For instance, journalists lack basic knowhow when it comes to content monetization in online platforms. According to Ethiopian media experts, the difficulty to monetize content from Ethiopia due to the payment system still being analog has been a disincentive to journalists to even acquire the skill. So far, tech companies like Google and Facebook disregard the Ethiopian market, which has discouraged journalists from investing their time and energy to optimize content and market it.

Experts argue that lack of digital expertise will not bode well for news media in Ethiopia in terms of viability. This sentiment was reflected in the 1.91 score given to the indicator measuring access to digital expertise.

3.4.5. Citizens Digital Right

Score: 1.5

Technological resources and expertise enhancing digital news media production and consumption do not work without the proper legal and institutional framework to protect the digital rights of citizens. In this regard, digital media regulation has evolved to focus on the rights approach in most countries around the world. In Ethiopia, digital right is largely a work-in-progress. Experts believe that the government is at the forefront of infringing upon citizens’ digital rights, since it disrupts and interferes with digital communication frequently. Routine internet shutdowns and disruptions are cited as one form of digital rights violation in Ethiopia.

“Many news media organizations in Ethiopia do not have the expertise to maintain and optimize their web-based platforms”

“So far, tech companies like Google and Facebook disregard the Ethiopian market, which has discouraged journalists from investing their time and energy to optimize content and market it”

“digital media regulation has evolved to focus on the rights approach in most countries around the world. In Ethiopia, digital right is largely a work-in-progress”
Apart from government surveillance, the fact that there is no data protection policy in the country is also a major gap in citizens’ digital rights. Under the camouflage of national security, a respondent said, users’ privacy has been violated with emails, phones and social media accounts of bloggers and journalists routinely breached. One expert said: “sometimes, intercepts of private communication are used as evidence in courts of law. Therefore, data security is hardly respected.”

3.5. Content and Expertise

Aggregate score: 10.18 (the maximum possible aggregate score for each dimension is 20)
Average score: 2.04 (the maximum possible average score for each dimension is 4)

The history of Ethiopian news media, no matter how brief, has always been animated with active controversy between the government and the commercial media subsector. The relationship between the two has always been defined by deep mistrust. The Ethiopian news media industry has stayed extremely polarized and partisan, with the public media blindly pumping ruling party point of view and the private press, for the most part, dispensing anti-government and anti-ruling party rhetoric.

Owing to the volatility of the domestic political environment, most opposition politicians and members of the private press have eventually left the country, giving birth to the diaspora based partisan media and the ruling party affiliated public and quasi-public news media organizations. This completely partisan news media industry was, of course, dotted with few independent and neutral media outlets, frequently accused of belonging to one side or the other by organized political interest groups in the country or abroad.

3.5.1. Quality Content

Score: 1.81

Most Ethiopian media experts deeply believe in the partisanship of the news media in Ethiopia. One respondent said: “both state and privately-owned media in Ethiopia practice loyalty to the authorities, political affiliations or owners/
advertisers and the ethnic/popular base of the groups they serve.” In fact, public/private dichotomy of the media is no more relevant in assessing partisanship of the news media in Ethiopia, since both the public and private/commercial media are now deeply divided along ethnic/religious/political lines. In serving partisan interests, the news media often disregards journalistic ethics and the quality of content.

The Ethiopian news media audience, however, is not completely deprived of quality content. A good portion of the Ethiopian news media audience has access to international news content, mostly through free-to-air satellite networks. According to an expert, the fact that the international news media covers stories about Ethiopia, although rarely, makes it interesting for the local audience. In most of its coverage, the international media sets good content quality standards, which can be informative to the local audience. However, the same expert also noted that “there are barriers to understanding news content churned out by the international media due mainly to the language – the average audience in Ethiopia struggles to understand news contents presented in foreign languages.”

The Ethiopian news media is also criticized for being elitist and urban-centered in its coverage. The majority of news media in Ethiopia is highly focused on political and economic news stories, heavy on the perspective of the political/economic elite and geographically concentrated in the urban centers. Hence, the minority and marginalized groups are conspicuously absent from news coverage. According to experts, this is due to different things including media institutions’ rush to produce sensational and clickbait content, lack of commitment and focus on what should be reported, and fear of reporting about minority issues. The most popular news media outlets in Ethiopia also use only a few local languages – mainly Amharic, Afaan Oromo and Tigrigna – contributing to the exclusion of minorities and marginalized groups from the news. Lack of language service diversity is particularly observed in the resource constrained and urban centered private media outlets.

What is a significant leap in news media language diversity is the expansion of what is called community radios, which produce news in local languages used in their service areas. There are around 54 community radio stations in Ethiopia. This number, however, continuously fluctuates due to the fragile state of community radios. According to experts, the contribution of community radios in expanding language inclusion in Ethiopia is immense. However, the challenge appears to be the quality of news produced. An expert said that “most of the community radios are basically startups and they require a lot of help to strengthen their capacity to produce news content that meets the minimum standard.”
3.5.2. Journalism Expertise

Score: 2.25

Journalism education has expanded in most public universities and higher-learning institutions in Ethiopia in the past decades. Within public universities, there are about 13 accredited journalism schools and programs. In terms of numbers there is hardly any shortage of journalism graduates to take up professional positions in both public and commercial news media organizations.

“The problem, instead, is the industry’s capacity to absorb fresh graduates every year and in the quality of the journalism training offered at these institutions. Commercial media outlets in particular often air concerns with regard to the quality of journalists that graduate from institutions every year. According to an expert, the problem is that most journalism school trainers and educators do not have practical experience in the profession. There is also very poor industry-university linkage to help with the preparation of graduates to meet real world challenges.”

Most of the news media industry in Ethiopia is established and run not by trained journalists but other professionals who are passionate about journalism and the media. Passion aside, journalism is not a well-paying profession in Ethiopia. Journalists are among the poorly-paid in the Ethiopian labor market. This is particularly true when journalists join media organizations at junior positions. However, for many years, the commercial news media in Ethiopia has fared better in terms of offering competitive pay to journalists.

This reality seems to be shifting in recent years. Commercial media is no longer competitive in offering attractive pay to professionals, which is partly because of challenges related to the financial viability of the sub-sector. Giant public broadcasters like the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC) are now the most competitive in terms of salary and benefit structures. This exposes another worrying trend in Ethiopian news media, according to the experts: the relative financial strength of the inherently partisan media and its capacity to attract professional journalists at the expense of the neutral media.

“At the end of the day, journalists are more stable in organizations where they get better compensation and job safety, most of which are public outlets, regardless of what the professional environment looks like. On the other hand, on the commercial side of the news media, the labor market is volatile; workforce turnover is also very high for a multitude of reasons including competition.”
3.5.3. Ownership of News Media Organizations

Score: 1.91

The government has a commanding lead in terms of controlling multiple media outlets and platforms in Ethiopia today. Legal restrictions give the government the edge over ownership of media organizations. There are laws to limit media cross ownership and involvement of foreign capital. These restrictions suggest the government is cautious about media ownership and the potential for conglomeration in the sector.

However, that was not enough to prevent political interests from owning and operating media platforms in Ethiopia. Although news media partisanship is readily apparent from the standard of reporting, the actual media ownership details of news media in Ethiopia is not transparent. As far as the commercial news media is concerned, if leading figures and the faces of the institutions are known, the identity of other shareholders and partners, having decisive voice on how the organization is run, is not always clear to the public. An expert said that “almost all media organizations have double identity, i.e. they claim to be private all the while financed by political interests and parties. Their structure is not known for the public to hold them accountable.”

Media market trends in Ethiopia are not generally indicative of concentration. If anything, the potential for concentration is higher for the government, which owns a number of outlets at national and regional levels and in diverse platforms. However, considering the population size and the media outlets available, one cannot claim that ownership of news media in Ethiopia is diverse. One respondent said that “[private] media in Ethiopia is mostly owned by men and concentrated in Addis.”

Media experts believe that most media outlets in Ethiopia are in one way or the other tied to officials or political elites. Indeed, most media owners are accused of having affiliations with authorities, cadres and powerful people. One respondent claimed that “it is impossible to survive the Ethiopian media landscape without some sort of connection to anchor politicians and powerful interest groups.”

In terms of respecting the editorial independence of the media, the government as owner of multiple public media outlets has the worst track record. Starting from the editorial policy, public media institutions have the least operational freedom. Nevertheless, editorial independence is also violated in the commercial news media by its powerful backers and owners. Although this does not happen on a regular basis, interest of owners in commercial media sector tends to show its ugly face once in a while. Respondents have assessed that the ownership structure of the media is a threat to media viability.
3.5.4. Business Structure

Score: 2.21

Internal organizational strength is an important aspect of news media viability. In this regard, an internal organizational structure that can support both commercial and editorial processes is the most vital. Most commercial media outlets in Ethiopia do have clearly defined commercial relationships and editorial processes. The shortcoming in commercial media management emanates from not having all-rounded media managers, with holistic knowledge and experience. Pertinent to the theoretical underpinnings of this study – that viability of the news media cannot be attained without content quality, media independence and financial sustainability – successful media management requires a taste of both worlds. News media managers in Ethiopia are usually either from content or business backgrounds, both of which face challenges in running financially sustainable and editorially independent media platform that produces quality news media content.

Ethiopian commercial news media has been criticized for not having proper business and operational strategies to guide them through tough political and economic times. A respondent noted in this regard that “media management has never been considered as an important component of media business in Ethiopia. Media is run just like other businesses.” This is evident from the lack of specialized knowledge and expertise on media management in Ethiopia and how media owners or influential shareholders are usually in charge of their own organizations instead of hired professional managers.

Business and financial plans of media houses (if they exist at all) are not communicated to employees properly. According to one expert, this is more pronounced in government-affiliated media houses. The expert explained that “the management is at the top and the majority of the staff is at the lower level of the hierarchy, and there is no means of communicating business and operational plans to employees at lower levels.”

Some of the major news media outlets in Ethiopia do have dedicated marketing and commercial departments in their organizational structure, tasked with generating revenue and managing advertisement clients. Depending on the outlet's financial capacity, permanent or temporary sales professionals are employed in these departments, where their full-time job would be selling the content of the news media organization. Some media outlets, on the other hand, may outsource such tasks to marketing and sales agencies and individuals because they cannot stomach the wage bill associated with having a marketing department.

According to an expert, most news media organizations are using a copy/paste of the advertising and broadcast regulation as their advertisement standardization document. Advertisement pricing is also fixed without assessing the market and the audience of news media organizations, just by benchmarking older media organizations. Collaborations among news media institutions in Ethiopia, both for sharing content and expertise and coming together to overcome adverse conditions, is very difficult to achieve due to their partisan nature. According to respondents, business structure will be a challenge for news media viability going forward.
3.5.5. Business Expertise

Score: 2.0

The modern concept of media viability is built on the idea that news media organizations cannot ensure long term viability without the provision of quality content to their audience. Quality content production, in turn, can only be sustained through the accumulation of the appropriate expertise, both on the editorial and business fronts. Viable news media, therefore, requires specialized business expertise as dictated by its own revenue model and content monetization strategies.

As far as the Ethiopian news media is concerned, most of the local outlets seem to have finance/administration as well as marketing and sales teams/persons employed either on a fulltime or part-time basis. Ethiopian media experts, however, confirm that managerial knowledge and skill is a commodity that is quite scarce in the media industry. In fact, they point out that media founders/entrepreneurs are often the go-to managerial knowledge depositories for the independent news media in Ethiopia. This could be for multiple of reasons including shortage of supply of professionals in the labor market, lack of financial capacity to hire, or simple lack of awareness.

Trained sales and marking personal working in Ethiopian news media organizations also exhibit some gaps in capacity. This gap in knowledge and expertise is more pronounced when it comes to adapting news media processes to the latest media technology advancements. According to the experts interviewed, keeping up with the current digital advancements, as much as it is about the expertise and the quality of professionals that media houses can afford, is also about the adaption rate of editorial and business processes of the organizations. But unfortunately, as one expert has stated, “media houses want experts who can help with up keeping the traditional media technology and not ones who aspire to adapt to the latest technological innovations in the media, let alone in-house innovation.”

The Ethiopian news media sector is also not very inclusive when it comes to empowering women and persons with disability. One exception to this, as identified by experts, is a local trend of preferring women to take up marketing and sales positions, driven by the misguided notion of ‘women can sell anything’. A media/gender expert stated that “women are hired in marketing and sales departments as a result of the negative stereotyping of women as ‘commodities’ – that they will attract market and customers”.

“women are hired in marketing and sales departments as a result of the negative stereotyping of women as ‘commodities’ – that they will attract market and customers”
4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, DW Akademie’s viability assessment tool is a structured interview tool that is designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data set on the news media viability conditions of a given media ecosystem or organization. While the scoring part of the interview is expected to drive mostly quantitative data regarding viability, and identify challenges and opportunities, there is also a separate section dedicated to gathering qualitative information, specifically on the obstacles to news media viability in the given media system.

This part of questionnaire tries to tap into the perception of media experts as to what constitute fundamental media viability obstacles in the country or media environment in question and the relative importance of these obstacles. Accordingly, experts are asked to identify three media viability dimensions, as defined by the MVI framework, as major impediments to viability and rank them. This exercise is supposed to happen before and after the main event, which is scoring of the indicators, and take note any shifts in the ranked obstacles and draw the appropriate insight to augment the overall analysis.

4.1. Major Obstacles for News Media Viability in Ethiopia

As far as the 14 experts interviews in Ethiopia is concerned, not a lot of changes were recorded in their ranking of the media viability obstacles, before and after the interview, but interesting findings/discrepancies surfaced in terms of obstacles ranked by experts and obstacles identified through scoring of the media viability indicators and sub-indicators. Therefore, almost all the media experts interviewed in the study identified “political and legal system,” “public attitude and relationship to media,” and “economic and ownership situation” to be the top three biggest obstacles to news media viability in Ethiopia. In fact, almost four-fifth of the respondents voted for “politics” to be ranked the biggest obstacle, while two-third voted for “public attitude and relationship to media,” and half of the experts cited “economic and ownership situation,” to be in the top three viability obstacles in the Ethiopian media environment. Experts understandably identified “political and legal system” as the most constraining challenge to news media institutions in Ethiopia since most of the problems faced by the media, or at least those in news headlines, were with the authorities and the law.

However, subsequent scoring of the media viability indicators and aggregation of those scores to drive meaning has crystallized the fact that the most severe media viability challenges to the Ethiopian news media come not from “political and legal system,” or “economic and ownership situation,” but “technological situation of the country” and “general quality of content”. The experts interviewed, nevertheless, did manage to establish “public attitude and relationship to media” as the main obstacle to news media viability in Ethiopia.

With overall score of 1.68, “public attitude and relationship to media” is by far the worst indicator dimension identified for news media viability in the study. The dimension’s low score is mostly because of two indicators measuring “media and information literacy” and “societal cohesion,” both of which fetched the lowest possible score, 1.0, meaning the overall situation on the ground is effectively the opposite of what is described by the indicators, which is a serious obstacle to news media viability. “News media trust and credibility”, which is another indicator in the same dimension, was also scored 1.90 - a figure slightly better than the average score for the dimension, but evaluated as very bad and problematic for news media viability.

A close second as the worst indicator dimension for news media viability in Ethiopia is “technological situation of the country,” which was scored 1.82, and which is also a situation that is very bad and problematic for news media viability. The dimension’s low score was based on the scores of three indicators measuring “digital rights of citizens”, “news media organizations’ access to production and distribution technology”, and “news media audience access to technology”, fetching scores of 1.50, 1.75 and 1.83 respectively, and again representing a situation that is very bad and problematic.
for news media organizations.

“General quality of content” is the third major viability obstacle to news media viability in Ethiopia. Two major indicators measuring “quality content” and “ownership of news media” scored weaker than most indicators in the framework, indicating possible intervention areas for policy makers and media development actors. Although “political and legal system” and “economic and ownership situation” scored fine as dimensions, specific indicators in them which measured “rule of law” and “national economy”, respectively, did receive one of the lowest scores at 1.0, constituting the biggest news media viability obstacles to Ethiopian media ecosystem.

**Major Obstacles**
- Media & Information Literacy
- Societal Cohesion
- Trust & Credibility
- Access to Technology
- Digital Rights of Citizens
- Digital Expertise
- Quality Content
- Ownership of News Media
- Rule of Law
- National Economy

4.2. Major Pillars for News Media Viability in Ethiopia

While the study identified a number of challenges to the Ethiopian news media viability, it also illuminated few bright spots that could serve as pillar for intervention for media organizations, regulators and media development actors. Accordingly, moderately competitive news media market, relative financial independence of the non-public service broadcaster (PSB), the untapped potential of the advertisement market, an huge audience base willing to pay for good content, and the laws establishing freedom of expression and the media were assessed to be the relatively stronger aspects of the Ethiopian news media ecosystem.

The sub-indicator measuring subsidies to non-PSB news media organizations fetched the highest score possible (4.0), underscoring the almost-non-existent role of direct subsidies in the viability of non-PSB news media in Ethiopia. This could also indicate relative editorial independence of non-PSB news media organizations from possible financial backers, a strong pillar for news media viability. It is also supported by the scoring of sub-indicators evaluating the internal organizational strength of news media companies in terms of having separate structures within the organizations dedicated to revenue generation, standardizing their services including the sale of advertising space and having written documents to that effect, and setting clearly established rules and procedures separating commercial activities from editorial operations. All of the three sub-indicators were scored above 3.0 by the experts; supporting the conclusion that financial independence and editorial freedom of non-PSB news media is a strong pillar to build on for media actors working in the area of media viability.

The sub-indicator addressing market competition also fetched the second highest score of 3.66, indicating a moderately competitive news industry that is highly supportive of news media viability. While hyper-competition and market saturation pose a serious threat to the viability of news industries around the globe, a moderately competitive new media market in Ethiopia can provide another good pillar to ensure the viability of the sector and the organizations.

**Major Pillars**
- Unsaturated (Moderately Competitive) Media Market
- Relative Financial Independence of News Media
- Untapped Potential of the Advertisement Market
- Laws Guaranteeing Freedom of Expression & the Media
On the other hand, it is also apparent that the media experts are fairly optimistic about the potential of the advertisement market as a continued and reliable source of revenue for news media organizations in the country. This is clearly reflected in their scoring of the sub-indicator investigating the advertisement market and its dependability as source of revenue for news media organizations which they scored at 3.33. Apart from that, sub-indicators regarding audience demand and the role of the advertisement agencies in defining the share of revenue that goes to the news media were both scored at 3.33 by the media experts interviewed for the study. The optimism surrounding the advertisement market seems to be a perspective that is repeatedly coming out of the expert interviews of this study. In fact, many media experts appear to be convinced that commercial-advertisement based media business model, referred to as the old media revenue model, is not only the primary model that is sustaining the news media in Ethiopia, currently, but it could also be a long way from its eventual collapse.

Although to a lesser extent, the laws establishing freedom of expression and the media were also identified as strong pillars for the viability of the Ethiopian news media. The sub-indicators assessing the legal structure that affects the media in Ethiopia were scored meaningfully high, above 3.0, underscoring their role in ensuring viability going forward.

4.3. Recommendations

Both the qualitative and quantitative data gathered, the subsequent analysis and the logical conclusions derived from this study clearly identifies gaps that can be addressed by the appropriate policy, regulatory and organizational level interventions if Ethiopia is to have a strong and viable news media sector that can play its decisive role in building a democratic system. While the majority of the recommended measures can easily fall within the realm of policy and state intervention, the study also points to few actionable steps that can be entertained at sectorial and media house levels.

1. Ensure proper enforcement of the media and media-related laws, proclamations, regulations and directives. While most of the required media laws and regulations including laws protecting freedom of expression, access to information and freedom of the media have already been codified, the experts consulted for this study are in agreement that the Ethiopian media space is lacking in terms of enforcing these laws fully, indiscriminately and as they were intended in the legal text.

1.1 Addressing wrong and unconstitutional interpretation of the legal statutes

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**Major Recommendation Areas**
- Enforcement of the media and media-related laws
- Media business model innovation and diversification of revenue sources
- Media and Information literacy (MIL), the spread of misinformation and societal divisions
- Market failures in technological market, infrastructure & expertise; rights approach to digital regulation
- University-industry linkages & media management & content marketing courses for quality of media professionals & graduates

**Enforcement of the media and media-related laws**
- unconstitutional interpretation of the legal statutes
- stalled legal reform process
- selective enforcement of some laws

Intellectual
of expression, freedom of media, right to access information...etc, through constant awareness raising training and advocacy, where government bodies like the Ministry of Justice can collaborate with media development actors, both foreign and domestic.

- The Ministry and the media regulator look into both new and existing media laws and directives for limitations and restrictions that amount to curtailing the basic freedoms enshrined in the FDRE Constitution.
- Media organizations and advocacy CSOs should mount constitutional court challenges on media laws and provisions that are not in agreement with the spirit of the FDRE Constitution and on those being used for the purpose of intimidating and silencing the media.

1.2 Expediting the legal reform process in conjunction to the media. This would entail:
- The Ministry and media law working group continuing the now stalled legal reform process especially media-related laws in the reform pipeline such as Access to Information Proclamation and Computer Crimes Law.
- Both the regulator and development actors coming together to speed up the ratification of implementation regulations and directives for the upcoming and existing media laws since the legal reform process cannot succeed without the implementation regulations and directives in place.

1.3 Minimize selective enforcement of some laws and proclamation that affect the media. This would entail:
- The regulator addressing complaints of non-uniform enforcement of media laws, pertaining to media ownership, investment incentives and privileges and the like. In particular, the disparities in enforcement between the independent and public media institutions, or between independent media and quasi-public or affiliate media houses in the country.

1.4 Increase awareness of Intellectual Property Right Laws and its protection. This would entail:
- Law enforcement bodies and media organizations have adequate understanding of Intellectual Property Right Laws through constant training and capacity building engagement, where the IPR office can collaborate with media development actors, both foreign and domestic to make this happen.

2. Encouraging and facilitating business model innovation and diversification of revenue sources in Ethiopian news media industry. Experts believe that Ethiopia’s news media sector is largely in the pre-digital age, where traditional advertisement model that largely relies on commercial advertisement and program sponsorship is the primary revenue model ensuring the survival of the sector. Yet again, they also recognize the market is quite small, unable to provide diverse advertisement clientele to media organizations, but with a lot of potential for growth with online monetization opportunities and properly regulated public advertisement contracts.

2.1 Recognizing online content monetization potential and facilitating for the realization of export revenue from media content. This would entail:
- Appropriate government bodies acknowledge the huge foreign currency potential of media
content with estimated number of 5 million Ethiopians in the diaspora, willing and able to consume news media content from their country of origin.

– Financial and banking regulatory bodies putting in place reliable and secured online payment mechanisms that can facilitate payment for online content, not only domestically but globally.

– Media organizations making the required software, hardware and human resource investments to make their content available for the digital news audience and exploit available monetization potentials.

– Financial and banking regulatory bodies putting in place financial products, mainly loan facilities that do not depend on steep collateral requirement which cannot be accessed by media organizations.

2.2 Formulating proper laws and regulations to govern the public sector advertisement economy. This would entail:

– Media regulators recognizing the deterministic role that can be played by the public sector as a major advertisement client for the local news media industry.

– Media sector and its regulators pushing for laws and regulations to govern the way government agencies use their Public Service Announcements (PSAs) and place commercial advertisement on local media institutions, while keeping the balance between fairness and market logic.

3. Breaking the vicious cycle of lack of Media and Information literacy (MIL), the spread of misinformation and societal divisions with conscious intervention at different levels. Experts believe that Ethiopia’s news media audience is largely characterized by severe lack of media literacy which is making it easy for misinformation to spread, causing irreparable damages to the social fabric of the nation. That is why experts believe this vicious cycle has to break somewhere, possibly with concert intervention to improve media literacy, build consensus and societal cohesion and encourage fact checking culture.

3.1 Conducting national and subnational MIL assessment, based on which careful steps can be taken to integrate MIL education into national education system at various levels. This would entail:

– Taking steps to launch MIL assessment projects at national or subnational levels to understand where the Ethiopian news media audience is along the MIL competence spectrum. Appropriate government and non-government bodies could look into MIL assessment frameworks like the one developed by UNESCO for inspiration.

– Integrating MIL education aspects in to mainstream education curriculums starting from elementary levels, where the focus could be on critical thinking and understanding the basics of facts, evidence, arguments, claims and conclusions.

– Integrating MIL education aspects in to mainstream
education curriculums at high school and university levels, with focus on acquiring the major MIL competencies.

– The public media platforms utilized to spread MIL education to the wider public.

3.2 Formulating and rolling out creative national, regional and communal dialogue forums, attacking some of the most pressing societal issues of the time to strengthen the weakening societal cohesion in Ethiopia. This would entail:

– Ministry of Peace or other government bodies working on concrete plans to bring together different societal groups around creative dialogue platforms placing some of the most pressing issues on the table.
– The government addressing the increasingly commonplace conflict and violence in Ethiopia as a means of resolving communal dispute, and upholding the rule of law and citizen’s rights.
– The government exploiting the public media platforms to promote peace, societal unity and cohesion.

3.3 Taking concrete steps to nurture the budding fact checking subsector and a fact checking culture in general as a weapon against misinformation and associated conflicts and violence in Ethiopia. This would entail:

– The government recognizing the emerging fact checking subsector and fact checking journalism discipline, and clear out existing administrative challenges with the classification, registration and operation of fact checking institutions in Ethiopia.
– The government leading by example in strictly requiring public media outlets to institute some sort of fact checking desk or team within their structures and start integrating fact checking activities in the editorial processes of the public media houses.
– The government exploiting the public media platforms to promote peace, societal unity and cohesion.
– The government taking concrete measures to correct market failure in the research and data output market either through incentivizing actors or making direct investment in the sector.

4. Initiating a concerted effort to correct serious market failures in technological market, improve access to technological infrastructure and expertise and incorporating the rights approach to digital regulation. Media experts believe that the Ethiopian news media sector is in pre-digital stage in a digital era, where access to media technologies, infrastructure and expertise is severely lacking, posing a serious threat to the viability of the sector.

4.1 Correcting market failures in the media technologies market that is characterized by unreliable supply, unstable prices and unpredictable demand for technological resources. This would entail:

– Science and innovation ministries taking measures to encourage domestic production of media

Market failures in technological market, infrastructure & expertise; rights approach to digital regulation

• unreliable supply, unstable prices and unpredictable demand for technological resources
• accesses, quality and pricing of technological infrastructure
• digital rights of citizens & the integrity of digital communication
and communication technologies and technological resources with a view of reducing reliance on imports.

– Recognizing the importance of media technologies for the survival of news media in the 21st century and applying fair and standard duties and taxes on imported media and communication equipment. Moving media technologies out of the luxury goods tax and duty brackets.

– Simplifying and standardizing import permits and customs clearance procedures pertaining to media and communication equipment.

– Putting in place reliable and secured online payment mechanisms that can facilitate payment for online technological services such as software usage fees, not only domestically but globally.

4.2 Improving accesses, quality and price of technological infrastructure that is vital for both the distribution and consumption of digital media content. This would entail:

– Expanding the coverage of technological infrastructure, most importantly internet connectivity to facilitate mass consumption of digital media content in the country.

– Improving the quality and price of internet connectivity as the most important digital content distribution channel to encourage wider consumption of digital media content.

– Improving the transparency of access to other media content distribution channels such as the issuance of airwave licenses.

4.3 Ensuring the digital rights of citizens and the integrity of digital communication to encourage online media content distribution and consumption. This would entail:

– National cyber security bodies incorporating digital rights considerations into their regulatory processes.

– National cyber security bodies having clear and transparent protocols and oversight scrutinizing their activities and keeping the delicate balance between citizens’ rights and their security.

– The government ensuring the transparency of decisions to implement internet and other forms of communication blackouts in the country.

5. Improving the quality of media professionals and journalism graduates through the creation of university-industry linkages and broadening the horizon of journalism programs to incorporate media management and content marketing courses. One of the issues consistently raised by media experts regarding content quality and expertise is that most journalism graduates in the labor market seriously lack practical knowledge of the profession; not to mention media management and content marketing knowhow.

5.1 Creating strong school-industry linkages between journalism programs and the media sector in Ethiopia to improve the employability of graduates in the local news media sector. This would entail:

– The 13 journalism education programs in Ethiopia’s public university system establishing a strong working relationship...
at least with one well-established media organization in view of offering a taste of the real world to students in the form short term internship programs before joining the labor force.  
– Media organization showing the willingness and preparation to open their doors to prospective journalism graduates on a continual basis to help elevate the quality of media professionals in the labor market.

5.2 Reviewing existing training curriculums of journalism programs in the country to incorporate media management and media content marketing courses in to mainstream education to equip graduates with all-rounded media operating knowhow.

5.3. Up scaling, both topically and coverage-wise, the existing on-job training and capacity building programs offered to practicing journalists by local and internal media development actors.
ABOUT MERSA MEDIA INSTITUTE
MERSA Media Institute is a nonprofit media policy think tank. We work to help create vibrant, responsible and independent media, professional unions and education centers through research, capacity building and institutional support in Africa. We believe free and independent media are lifelines to the development of peaceful, prosperous, and democratic societies.

OUR EXPERTS
Our organization is established and run by experienced media practitioners, educators, researchers, and knowledge management experts who are passionate about the role of independent media in the development of informed citizens that are self-governing.

MISSION
Our media research and training partnerships are designed to create stable, peaceful and prosperous nations where diversity of views, identities and interests are respected and engrained in robust public discourse.

THEORY OF CHANGE
MERSA Media Institute works to support objective journalism and strengthen media institutions to be self-governing, sustainable and committed to inform the public on issues that affect their lives. We value and work towards the development of professionals and institutions that have strong ethics and public interest, and are devoted to create accountable governance.

HOW WE DO THAT
We provide data-driven research to equip policy makers with information to help them make sound policy decisions in setting media regulatory frameworks and legal reforms. We build the capacity of journalists through training; conduct business sustainability studies for media houses; and help create and develop press councils, unions and codes of ethics.