Revitalisation
of the Ukrainian
Media System

in the Local & Regional Space

Strategy Paper by the Media
Development Foundation,
Ukraine & CORRECTIV, Germany

Introduction

One of the most recent research reports by the Media Development Foundation in Ukraine, published in February 2024, outlines the urgency of the rise of news deserts in Ukraine and the growth of the entire local districts (or the whole regions) into informationally unhealthy areas [1]. The tendency signifies that some local communities might have limited access to sufficient information about public safety, healthcare, politics and governance, education, transportation, economic development, environment, and civic initiatives. During wartime, this tendency may weaken national resilience and recovery. It may also adversely affect Ukraine's democratic transition, nourished by broad public awareness and informed decision-making.

While significantly impacted by the war and war-related factors, the news deserts phenomenon in Ukraine is also part of a global tendency. In particular, the new study "Uncovering news deserts in Europe. Risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU," published by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom in February 2024, indicated the fragile situation for local media across the EU. Discussed in the European Parliament on March 5, 2024, the report recommended 1) providing financial support to local and community newsrooms and journalists and 2) putting in place a regulatory framework, such as clear definitions of local and community media, to guarantee institutional support [2]. News deserts are also spread across the US [3].

In view of the situation and the urgency of war-related factors in Ukraine, this study aims to answer the research question: How might the media development in Ukraine, some parts of which are categorized as news deserts or are at risk of transitioning into that category, be impacted so that the local communities could benefit from new or transformed local publishing initiatives?

To answer this question, the Strategy Paper will:

explain the logic and characteristics of the Ukrainian local media landscape, media market peculiarities, business models, and understanding of private and public media brands' development on local and regional levels in Ukraine;

clarify the peculiarities of local journalism by defining current models for community journalism in Ukraine at times of war and fragmented reconstruction;

categorise local media outlets in Ukraine based on their business models and other characteristics impacting their performance and operational capabilities;

identify key market entry hurdles, development limits, as well as innovation drivers and possibilities in times of war and economic hardship for different regions in Ukraine;

describe the role of the donor funding for Ukrainian media based on available data;

develop the roadmap for providing the impact using the elements of the theory of change (elements of Input-Output-Outcome-Impact-Methodology (IOOI)), in particular, for how a small initiative of local news publishing could be supported and transformed into a sustainable community-centered media.

The Strategy Paper derives key takeaways from the Research Paper [a] that provides the underlying information on community media development, such as the baseline understanding of community media, characteristics of community-centered media under the European and Ukrainian context, a data-based explanation of existing business models for local media outlets in Ukraine, and presents the case study of community media outlets in Eastern, Central, and Western Europe that hold relevance for the development of community media and overcoming the news deserts phenomenon both in Ukraine and the European Union. Putting a clear understanding of the notion of community media in place is one of the most

underlying undertakings for both the EU and the Ukrainian civil societies to address the phenomenon of news deserts and the fragility of community media initiatives. The differences in understanding of community media goals and purposes in Ukraine and the EU might have been impacted by various cultural, economic, and political factors; however, the war-related factors are of the utmost relevance and significance for the purposes of this paper. Among them:

more than two years into the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia and the constant exposure of local publishers to war-related risks;

the urgency of resistance to Russian war-related cultural and political influences on the local level;

additional critical information needs of local communities in Ukraine associated with factors of full-scale war, internal displacements, and humanitarian aid;

the ongoing transition of the country to democracy and EU membership that puts additional pressure on local watchdog organisations, including community media;

the significance of charitable, crowdfunding, and civil society initiatives for Ukraine's resilience, society's resources Organization and recovery. The above factors influence the present and future transitions of the Ukrainian local publishing initiatives into sustainable community media outlets during Ukraine's resilience and recovery. At the same time, the EU local publishers' practices and experience are of the most relevance and priority for the Ukrainian in-war and post-war recovery. Timely addressing the issue of news deserts by supporting community media in Ukraine might benefit its future steps towards democratic transition, EU membership, and overcoming the consequences of war.

1.2 Community Media Models in Ukraine

Based on the Research Paper by the MDF as a part of this study [a], a significant portion of the Ukrainian local media can be Organization as community-centered media organisations, according to such criteria as:

• Objectives of the media Organization;

• The ownership and control of community media;

• The content is locally oriented and produced;

• The production of the content;

• The audience;

• The financing.

The strategy for various community models depends on the informational health status of local communities and the whole regions of Ukraine. Careful analysis of all representative media outlets should be the basis for decision-making that will benefit future reconstruction. At the same time, based on the models presented in the table, the key factors might be considered:

• Maturity of community media since supporting media organisations rooted in the communities is crucial for democratic development and informational health of communities;

• Role of volunteers and community members in the media since it is one of the most advantageous aspects of community journalism for democratic transition;

• The cross-communal, cross-regional, and trans-border cooperations, given the size of the country and the need for local journalism to nourish the local impact of democratic decision-making and also since the successful local governance reform in Ukraine had given rise to local voices before the war started; also it is possible to facilitate the connection between Ukrainian local media organization and a local media outlet from another country (especially in case some of them shared similar socio-economic perturbations - Kryvbass and Ruhrbergbau, for example, both has been through mining operations on a mass scale, mining protests, rapid desindustrialisation during the war and/or social identity being based on being 'the tough miner region';

• The ability to adapt to changing environments and war efforts, helping to support public safety at the local level

Table 1. Characterizations of Community Media Models in Ukraine

Community Media Model	'Mature' Community-Centered Media	Startup Community Centered Publisher	'Young' War-Time Digital Local Newsroom	Cross-regional Local Newsroom	Cross-communal Local Newsroom	Other Types of Community Media
Media's Age	More than 5 years; rooted in the community	Varies; some startups are older, and some launched after February 24, 2022	Launched after February 24, 2022	Varies, most are 'mature'	Varies, most are 'mature'	Varies
Objectives	News and investigations relevant to the needs of the community members	News and information relevant to the needs of the audience within the community and outside	Timely news reporting, various war content, no investigations	Information relevant to more than one community in different regions of Ukraine; may include occupied territories	Information relevant to more than one community; may include occupied territories	Information targeted in various ways at specific groups of people (for example, ethnic minorities, internally displaced people, etc.); other hybrid types of media (for example, local branches ('hubs') of public mainstream war-oriented media informing communities about primary safety issues)
Ownership	Private	Private; volunteers may contribute	Private; volunteers may contribute	Private	Private	Mostly private
Content	Locally oriented	Not exclusively local, depends on the audience	Not exclusively local, depends on the audience	Locally oriented, covering more than one community across different regions	Locally oriented, covering more than one community within the same region	Locally oriented, specified
Production	Professional; freelancers may be included	Professional; volunteers and freelancers may be included	Professional; volunteers and freelancers may be included	Professional; freelancers may be included	Professional; freelancers may be included	Professional; freelancers may be included
Audience	Local	Wide	Wide	Regional	Local	Local
Financing	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, Reader Revenue	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, Reader Revenue	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, Reader Revenue	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, Reader Revenue	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, Reader Revenue	Revenue Mix: Grants, Advertising, sometimes Reader Revenue
Role of volunteers and community members	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience	Donations, reader revenue, creative ways of interacting with the audience
War-related changes in the model	Donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information, special war content	Donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information, special war content	Donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information, special war content	Donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information, special cross-regional war content	Donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information, special cross-communal war content	Change in content, donations increase, additional social media engagement for providing public safety information
Examples of local publishers	"Echo Chervonohrad" (West of Ukraine); Sieverodonetsk-online (East of Ukraine)	Thebuchacity (North of Ukraine); Vilnohirsk.in.ua (Center of Ukraine).	Kordon.media (North of Ukraine); Donbas.frontliner (East of Ukraine), 360war.in.ua (South and East of Ukraine).	Intent (South of Ukraine); Rayon.in.ua (network of local media across West, North, and South of Ukraine)	"Varosh" (West of Ukraine), PMG.ua (West of Ukraine), MOST (South of Ukraine), Free Radio (East of Ukraine)	Some of the community-centered regional and local branches ('hubs') of Suspilne (Suspilne Sumy as an example)

1.3 Development of Public and Private Media Brands in Ukraine

In Ukraine, most private media outlets that operate at the local and regional levels either belong to private owners or are based on NGOs or their associations. However, it should be noted that there are also branches of Suspilne Media – a public joint-stock broadcaster's agency with 100% of its shares belonging to the state [b]. Suspilne Media generates content in digital, radio, and TV formats. It is divided into 24 regional branches covering almst every oblast, including the Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts) and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea [c]. These regional branches have separate websites and Social Networks (Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, Viber, and Telegram). Also, Suspilne Media has a Mobile App on its national level.

Focusing on Dnipropetrovsk oblast, Suspilne Dnipro publishes regular news on its website and social media: Telegram [d], Facebook [e], Instagram [f], and the YouTube channel [g]. Also, in case of a blackout or mobile phone outage, local FM radio (and Medium Wave AM Broadcast, since they could be operational in case of total collapse) channels Ukrainian Radio, Radio Promin', and Radio Culture (Pavlohrad, Nikopol, Kryvyi Rih, Zhovti Vody, and Dnipro city) can be set up.

The case of Suspilne Media and Its regional network Is an example of proactive media brand building. Suspilne Media maintains its editorial independence even with state funding due to a checks-and-balances system and internal policies. Its reportages and interviews with influencers reached a new level of quality and attracted many viewers [h]. The audience trusts the media because of its reputation and highest journalistic standards [4].

These factors have contributed to building a solid media brand, directly connecting with audience retention and audience support. This support can be divided into financial and non-financial. Financial reader revenue is based on donations, subscriptions, and other means of transferring funds. Non-financial contributions are crowdsourcing, social media support, and media brand promotion among subscribers [5].

Local and regional media see organizational development as part of the development of the media brand, as outlined in the Financing of Online Media study [will be published soon]. Developing and implementing a brand strategy inevitably requires financial resources, which newsrooms often need more for such a 'non-priority' item. However, in the medium and long term, a well-built brand will lead to both new audience growth and increased engagement of the core audience.

Local and regional media use basic and affordable approaches to communicate their brand and increase community visibility. An excellent example of a regional media outlet that has rebranded and strengthened its brand is the Odesa-based independent socio-political outlet Intent [i]. The rebranding, which began with a change in the media's name, boosted their expansion to the Kherson and Mykolaiv regions and soon to Crimea. The name change triggered a full-scale invasion: the previous name, 'Izbirkom,' had a Russian language origin, which the audience could interpret ambiguously.

'Russia has pushed us hard not to allow anything Russian-language to remain.' – Valery Bolgan, editor-in-chief of Intent, comments to Mediamaker [6].

The editorial team may publish news later than others but provides verified information with an opinion. In addition, their editorial policy is public, posted on the website, and based on ethical and professional standards.

Another example of effective brand building is the independent Lviv-based investigative media outlet NGL.Media [j]. In 2023, they changed the name of the media outlet, as the previous name was indicative of belonging to the nationwide investigative community – Nashi Groshi (Our

Money). Different newsrooms have been established under Nashi Groshi's name in different regions of Ukraine. After the name change, the media outlet became more recognizable among the audience. This decision was made possible due to the developed strategy, which the MDF supported as part of the Emergency Media Assistance Fund program in 2022. After all, decisions about rebranding and marketing a new brand will require additional funding.

The partners' reputation Is also essential for NGL's positive brand. Media: they work only with media and partners with a strong reputation and provide transparent reports [k]. They also actively work with various reliable communities and groups where they distribute their materials. Such cooperation increases the credibility of the materials and ensures the media's independence, which inevitably impacts their brand.

The strategy for community media brand development might include:

• Verifying the editorial independence of local publishers to ensure democratic progress and independent media development in Ukraine;

• Providing assistance to community-centered brand development of media organisations that improve the informational health of communities by ensuring the critical informational needs of local communities.

• Facilitate the establishment of partnerships, both intra-national and inter-national. The media organization can boost its trustworthiness by association with other established organizations and/or media development programs or NGOs.

• Help with audience research regarding audiences' perception of media brands in their region and their media consumption habits. It is possible that media Organization with established editorial independence is either too young, too small, or too slow compared to other news sources.

1.4 Ukrainian Media Landscape: Content Production Differences at the Regional Level

1.4.1 Government-controlled territory of Ukraine

For more than two years of war and partial reconstruction, news has remained the leading content format of local media. This is evidenced by the data from the annual surveys of the state of regional media in Ukraine conducted by MDF: in 2022 and 2023, about 80% of local and regional media surveyed reported publishing news as their primary content format. The respondents to the annual survey (local and regional media) in 2023 produced, on average, about 20 news pieces per day and 16 non-news pieces per week [7].

On the one hand, the news feed informs the population about essential events in the war and life on the home front. On the other hand, it brings significant online media traffic, mainly because it contains sensitive content that triggers Ukrainian society.

Local media clearly intends to continue developing long and short video formats in 2024 — 62% of the editorial teams surveyed in the annual MDF 2023 survey want to continue working with video. However, all surveyed media have concluded that the audience quickly gets tired of long videos, so there is a demand for short formats such as YouTube Shorts, TikTok, and Reels. Captioned videos and emotional videos on TikTok are rapidly gaining popularity.

The biggest obstacle to creating video formats is the need for more professional videographers. Newsrooms also need more financial resources to hire a highly qualified videographer, and some newsrooms need professional filming equipment.

The local and regional media covered by the MDF study have lately emphasized the production of various kinds of analytical materials to fulfill their watchdog function. In particular, they reported on monitoring budget expenditures and the work of local governments, investigating public procurement, auditing public data, etc.

Although investigations are an important content format for local authorities to control the reconstruction process and use local budgets, they are labor- and cost-intensive to produce. That is why only 22% of the surveyed local and regional media said they had published investigations during the year.

A small proportion of the media outlets produced explainers, stories, interviews, streams, reportages, and podcasts.

Andriy Dikhtyarenko, MDF's chief content expert and editor-in-chief of the Realna Gazeta Luhansk regional media outlet [1], mentioned to MDF that the reduction in reporting and investigations may be caused by self-censorship. He claimed journalists are afraid of the consequences of publishing sensitive content and content related to security, internal military, political decisions, essential infrastructure facilities, etc.: inadvertent coverage of these things can lead to administrative or criminal prosecution or public condemnation. As Andriy Dikhtyarenko added, journalists are less likely to go to the war zone, which may be due to physical danger in the frontline/temporarily occupied territories, limited access to combat areas, and the risk of male reporters being mobilized.

Another crucial factor contributing to the low number of reports is the lack of information. In relatively "rear" regions, authorities could deny access to information more often than administrations from "frontline" regions. At the same time, the media working for the target audience from the occupied territories generally lack information. All of the above obstacles are reflected in the low number of reports and the overall content. Andrii Dikhtyarenko considers this a dangerous trend for the Ukrainian media landscape, as it causes the media to lose touch with the audience and fails to show what is happening.

Concerning the content, war-related topics have become the most popular in the last two years: news from the frontline, shelling, hostilities, occupation, and soldiers' obituaries cover a large audience from different regions of Ukraine. At the same time, the audience is interested in military and corruption investigations.

Representatives of local and regional media also believe that the content topics differ depending on the region where the media are based. For example, media outlets in the East and South of Ukraine produce more content about military events because they are closer to the frontline. These media outlets try to create more meaningful and conceptual materials about events on the battlefield, shelling, occupation, and investigations into the actions of traitors. The media in the East and South of Ukraine also often raise the issue of de-occupation of the occupied regions of Ukraine: demining, restoration of infrastructure, return of people, and humanitarian aid. Although these are primarily forecasts, it is crucial for residents or evacuated citizens to feel that the government is not neglecting them and is addressing these issues to resolve the situation.

Media audiences across Ukraine slowly return to day-to-day topics such as utility services, local incidents, etc. This is partly because the audience might be tired of the war events, MDF researchers conclude, based on surveys and interviews with media representatives. In the "rear" regions (West, Center, and most of the North), regular topics about community life are more interesting, as the structure of their primary local audience has not changed significantly.

A notable aspect of the content of Western, Central, and Eastern media outlets is an increased focus on materials about IDPs, their needs, and their integration into society. Also popular is content describing personal stories of IDPs and other vulnerable groups who have been affected by the war in one way or another.

The data collected also shows that the audience of local and regional media is interested in the history and ethnography of the community or region covered by the media. Moreover, the audience is interested in debunking myths about the formation of national and ethnic identities of the regions. Interest in their culture, history, and traditions is growing across the country, particularly in the East and South, as these regions have been more heavily russified and exposed to Russian propaganda. Today, the media are among the actors in shaping national identity and preserving historical memory.

The strategy for content production in government-controlled territories might include:

• Assistance to the watchdog role of community-centered media, in particular, investigations and local authority accountability regular checks by community media;

• Ensuring access to critical and war-related information for all communities, in particular, those lacking informational health;

• If possible, provide upscaling of best practices by local media actors on communication with local civilian and military authorities;

• Providing assistance with safety issues for media organisations covering the war.

1.4.2 Temporarily occupied territory of Ukraine

Speaking of content aimed at the audience in the temporarily occupied territories, MDF's research conducted for the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence revealed that the most popular format is short videos with recommendations for survival: how to leave the occupation, how to obtain the proper documents, where to find humanitarian aid and resources for survival, etc. The interviewed online media experts pointed to this format and topics based on analyzing their audience indicators. They also noted that short videos are viewed by older people, which was not the case before.

News about life and the situation in cities under occupation would be in high demand by displaced people in the government-controlled territory and refugees abroad, but this topic is currently off-limits for a number of reasons: first, it is hazardous to provide information by informants who are in the occupation; second, there is no access to information provided by Ukrainian local authorities, as these bodies are either captured by the occupation forces or relocated to the government-controlled territory, and officials do not cooperate, probably due to increased security risks and military confidentiality. Media outlets that used to produce content about and for the regions currently temporarily occupied by Russia are now reconsidering their content formats and topics.

The strategy for content production in temporarily occupied territories might include:

• assistance with producing short videos with recommendations for survival for citizens by the media working with temporarily occupied territories;

• support solutions aimed at reaching audiences on temporarily occupied territories, or organize brainstorm sessions/hackathons on this if possible.

1.4.2.1 Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in Focus

It is worth focusing on the content when analyzing the media market in the Dnipropetrovs'k region. For this purpose, we have chosen one of the most prominent media outlets in the region, Pershyi Kryvorizkyi (based in Kryvyi Rih) [m], specifically, the news feed for March 22, 2024. On this day, the media made 47 news publications, which were categorized on the website into the following thematic sections:

- War in Ukraine - 15 news items (consequences of massive missile attacks across Ukraine, air defense work to destroy enemy missiles and drones, information about the environmental threat from enemy attacks in the Dnipro region, assistance from international partners);

- Society - 12 news (about social assistance and administrative services, debunking fakes, informing about the sowing campaign in Dnipropetrovsk oblast, etc;)

- Kryvyi Rih - 9 news items (city events such as the resumption of water and electricity supply, weather forecast, city budget expenditures, etc;)

- Emergency events - 9 news items (e.g., news about a crime, schedules of emergency power outages, wanted person);

- Ukraine - 1 news item (national news, such as information about power outages in 7 regions of Ukraine);

- Culture - 1 news item (Literature club in Kryvyi Rih);

- Sports - no news for the selected period;

- Economy - no news for the selected period.

News about the events of the Russian-Ukrainian war has the most significant contribution, while there are almost no thematic materials about the economics, sports, culture, and national policies. It is worth noting that tهhe territory of the Dnipropetrovs'k region is close to the frontline, and its population has hosted numerous internally displaced persons. Some settlements (Nikopol, Marhanets, and others) directly border the occupied territories and suffer from enemy shelling almost every day. This explains the audience's demand in Dnipropetrovsk oblast for news about the war (although the interest in war is a national trend).

1.5 Role of Grants in Informational Health of Communities and Strategy for International Group of Donors

According to The Donor Landscape of Media Support in Ukraine research conducted by Lviv Media Forum [8], there is a list of donor organisations that have served support for the Ukrainian media outlets during the last two years.

Table 2. A List of International Organizations with Presence in Ukraine

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
Internews Network	internews.in.ua	• Local free press access to information • Advance systemic inclusion of marginalized voices • Filling critical gaps in quality content • Supporting the ability of people to critically engage with news and information
European Endowment for Democracy	www.democracyendowment.eu/thematic-areas.html	EED supports local media - including bloggers, digital platforms, satirists and other innovative news and information outlets - to grow as independent and quality communication channels as a mechanism to ensure media pluralism and access to independent and alternative information.
IREX	www.irex.org/region/europe-eurasia/ukraine	• Citizen Engagement and Reform Communication • Community Engagement Exchange • Community Solutions • Ukraine Media Partnership Program (UMPP) • Strengthening Media Literacy in the Ukrainian Education System • United Community
National Endowment for Democracy	www.ned.org	• Strengthening the institutions and procedures of electoral democracy to ensure free and fair elections • Encouraging the gradual consolidation of liberal democracy by measures that strengthen the rule of law, protect individual liberties, and foster social pluralism • Supporting groups who work to establish a functioning free press as well as institutions that promote political accountability, economic transparency, responsible corporate governance, and civilian control over the military

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
USAID	www.usaid.gov/democracy/supporting-vibrant-civil-society-independent-media	USAID promotes civil society, labor rights, youth and independent media strengthening in order to advance development.
Deutsche Welle Akademie	akademie.dw.com/en/who-we-are/s-30788	Deutsche Welle's center for international media development, journalism training and knowledge transfer; projects strengthen the human right to freedom of expression and unhindered access to information.
Prague Civil Society Centre	www.praguecivilsociety.org/about	Grants provide flexible resources to local groups, coalitions and movements so they can launch or grow civic projects, and to independent media so they can build new platforms and expand their audience
European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)	https://www.ecpmf.eu	• Promote, preserve and defend media freedom • Cross-border investigative journalism • Freelancer support
Civil Society Organization «Initiative Center to Support Social Action «Ednannia»	ednannia.ua/en/programs	• Civil Society Sectoral Support Activity • EU4Civil Society Sustainability in Ukraine • EU Emergency Support to Civil Society Project - Supporting local philanthropy
The Fix Foundation	www.thefix.foundation	Free press and innovative media support.
International Renaissance Foundation	www.irf.ua/en/programs/	• Strengthening Ukrainian Voices for International Support for Ukraine • Resilience, Recovery and Development of Territorial Communities
U.S. Embassy in Ukraine	ua.usembassy.gov/education-culture/grants-opportunities/media-development-fund-program/	• Fortifying independent journalism in Ukraine, particularly in the regions most affected by the ongoing conflict • Enhancing accountability in the utilization of recovery funds amidst Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine • Sustaining independent reporting, safeguarding press freedom • Promoting accountability in governance, thereby contributing to the resilience of Ukrainian society

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
Media in Cooperation and Transition (MICT)	mict-internation-al.org/	Fellowship for Critical Voices – work with over 400 journalists and media makers, offering support in 7 areas relevant to maintaining critical voices in crisis regions.
Institute for War and Peace Reporting	iwpr.net/what-we-do	War crimes covering.
Thomson Reuters Foundation	www.trust.org	• Strengthening local and national journalism • Improving media ethics and standards, and combatting misinformation • Exploring and shaping the future of the profession
Solidarity Fund PL	solidarityfund.pl	Defence of free speech and the access to objective and reliable information for democratisation.
n-ost	n-ost.org	• Enhance European media coverage of Ukraine by promoting cross-border journalism, fostering a lasting journalistic network and amplifying Ukrainian voices and perspectives • Climate Journalism • Empower journalists to unlock authentic narratives and promote diverse representation within the media content through a queer feminist perspective
International Press Institute	ipi.media	Promoting the conditions that allow journalism to fulfill its public function, the most important of which is the media's ability to operate free from interference and without fear of retaliation.
The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation	ucf.in.ua	• Support for individual creative activity of artists and cultural leaders • Support for projects aimed at increasing regional cultural diversity, including the cultures of the indigenous peoples of Ukraine in the life of Ukrainian society, support for artists and cultural institutions in the frontline and de-occupied territories
Goethe-Institut	www.goethe.de/ins/ua/de/kul/mut.html	Media literacy and countering disinformation.

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
Pact EN-GAGE	www.pactworld.org/country/ukraine	Support local pro-reform civil society organizations working to promote government transparency and accountability and civic involvement.
Reporters Without Borders	rsf.org/en	• Concrete solutions and launch international initiatives • Assist journalists in danger
ERIM Equal Rights & Independent Media	erim.ngo	• Media and information literacy • Assistance and capacity building to media organisations, journalists, media lawyers and civil society organisations focused on media freedom • Media development
NDI	www.ndi.org/eurasia/ukraine	Promotion of issues and tools for democratic decision-making process.
Chemonics	chemonics.com/projects/promoting-unity-in-ukraine/	• Promote a democratic, prosperous, and unified Ukraine • Strengthen inclusive Ukrainian identity based on pluralistic civic values • The Partnership Fund for a Resilient Ukraine (PFRU) program
SIDA	www.sida.se/en/sidas-international-work/countries-and-regions/ukraine	Support to independent media, civil society, environmental work and social reforms.
Czech Embassy in Ukraine	mzv.gov.cz/kyiv	Vaclav Havel Journalism Fellowship.
Media Development Investment Fund	www.mdif.org	Investing in independent media and extensive expertise in media viability.
People in Need	www.peoplein-need.net/what-we-do/migration-awareness/our-offer-for-media	Fair and balanced coverage of migration and foreigners, forming of migrant's image through media coverage.

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
Heinrich Böll Stiftung	ua.boell.org/en	• Promoting democracy and the development of civil society (developing the tolerant political culture of participation, encouraging decision-making on the local and national levels; cultivating an inclusive critical discussion on historical and social issues; expanding the green movement based on left-liberal ideas) • Gender Democracy (raising the awareness of the education community, and mainstreaming gender issues, including LGBT issues, in public discourse)
United Nations Development Programme	www.undp.org	• Strengthen the resilience of Ukrainian media outlets by providing financial and technical assistance to help them maintain their operations and continue reporting on the war and its impact on the country • Providing training and resources to help journalists and media professionals adapt to the changing media landscape and improve their online presence • Promoting media and information literacy among Ukrainians by providing educational programs and resources to help people critically evaluate the information they consume • Development of community media initiatives • Support the recovery of Ukraine's media sector within the UN Recovery Framework
International Media Support (IMS)	www.mediasupport.org/what-we-do/	• Safety of journalists (trainings, practical measures, advocacy) • Local solutions to global problems • Support of independent filmmakers and film institutions
Free Press for Eastern Europe	www.fpee.info	• Education in new media • Fostering cross-sectoral collaborations between media and scientists • Developing collaborative responses to global challenges to independent press

Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
WAN-IFRA	wan-ifra.org	• Protect the rights of journalists and publishers to operate a free media • Support to independent media in their efforts to fight an intensifying information war • Promote a sustainable business ecosystem for the news, safeguarding media integrity, ensuring the safety of journalists, and upholding press freedom for global democracy
European Journalism Centre	ejc.net	• Grant funding for freelancers and facilitates research opportunities to support solutions-focused development journalism • Promotion of climate journalism • Support cross-border watchdog journalism etc
Open Media Hub	www.thomson-foundation.org/projects/open-media-hub/	Strengthen independent media and professional journalism: delivered in-country workshops for media managers, active production sessions on critical topics with editorial staff and set up a journalist exchange scheme all aimed at supporting the creation of high-quality television and video production.
JX Fund – European Fund for Journalism in Exile	jx-fund.org	• Providing immediate financial and logistical support to Ukrainian media professionals who have fled the country, enabling them to continue their work quickly and flexibly in exile • Offering advice and assistance to help Ukrainian media outlets develop sustainable models for their work in exile • BoostYourMedia: Ukraine Incubator – providing individualized support to 10 Ukrainian media outlets with international audiences and hybrid editorial teams • Connecting the Dots research grants, with a focus on data-based and investigative reporting, as well as multimedia storytelling

| Organisation	Website	Relevant field of support
DT Global	dt-global.com	• The EU-funded EU 4 Independent Media - strengthening independent journalism and media in Ukraine by supporting fact-based, gender-inclusive, and reliable public interest journalism • USAID-funded Media Program - empower local media to expand Ukrainian citizens' access to high-quality news and information, counter malign influence, and support European integration
Council of Europe	www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/freedom-of-media-in-ukraine	• Align Ukrainian media legislation and practice with European standards. Key objectives include building a financially sustainable and editorially independent public broadcaster, strengthening community media, enhancing media actor safety, and ensuring transparency in media ownership and operations • Action Plan for Ukraine - strengthening media capacity, promoting ethical and conflict-sensitive reporting, and enhancing media coverage of elections

1.6 The Need for Foreign Development Aid at the Local and Regional Level

Research data from the Media Development Foundation on the informational health of local areas and communities has shown that all regions of Ukraine (Western, Central, Central, Northern, and Southern) are fragile in terms of spreading news deserts and lack of funding.

While physical proximity to the frontline and direct war-related risks might be crucial factors that explain the media landscapes of some communities in Ukraine during times of war, other factors, such as historical, socio-economic, and political, play out significantly as well. Further analysis and impact on the areas the most endangered of becoming news deserts or already categorized as new deserts is of the highest priority and relevance for media development in the country.

Informational Health of Western & Central Regions and Frontline Regions of Ukraine

■ Not healthy or partially healthy ■ Healthy

Western & Central Regions: 46,9% / 53,1%

Frontline Regions: 61,8% / 38,2%
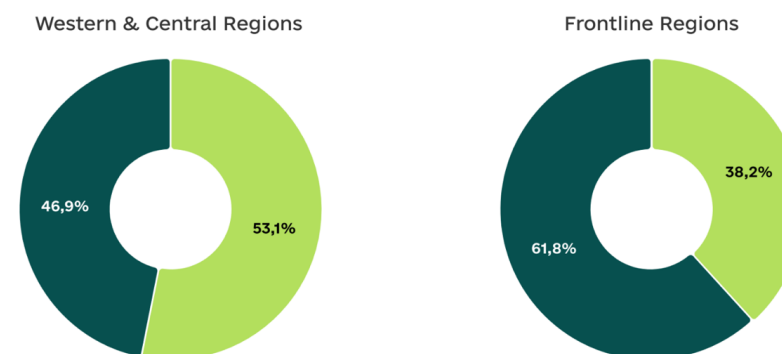
Categories "not healthy" and "partially healthy" were combined into one; results are calculated based on data from the News Desert in Ukraine MDF's study (2023-2024)

Pic. 1. The comparison of informational health between frontline and rear regions of Ukraine by the Media Development Foundation

In terms of funding, the collected data has shown that Western and Central regions of Ukraine received the lowest levels of foreign development aid, in particular eight western oblasts (Volyn, Zakarpattia, Ivano-Frankivsk, Lviv, Rivne, Ternopil, Khmelnytskyi, and Chernivtsi) and five central oblasts (Vinnytsia, Poltava, Kirovohrad, Cherkasy, and Dnipropetrovsk). These oblasts may be referred to as "rear" areas due to their relative distance from the frontline.

According to the research findings, foreign aid in grants constituted 45% of the revenues of Western Ukrainian local newsrooms and 50% of those in Central Ukraine as of the end of 2023. In contrast, other parts of Ukraine had significantly higher shares of donor funding in the reported revenues: 73% for Northern Ukrainian local publishers, 87% for South Ukrainian local publishers, and 93% for those in Eastern Ukraine.

At the same time, the lower levels of reported grant support are supported by the data on the risk of funding loss as defined by local newsrooms themselves. The surveyed local publishers in Western Ukraine mentioned the risk of funding loss much more frequently, contrary to those in the Eastern parts of Ukraine. This data might indicate a considerable level of disparity among different parts of Ukraine regarding the risk of funding loss: the difference between the West and the North is up to 24%.
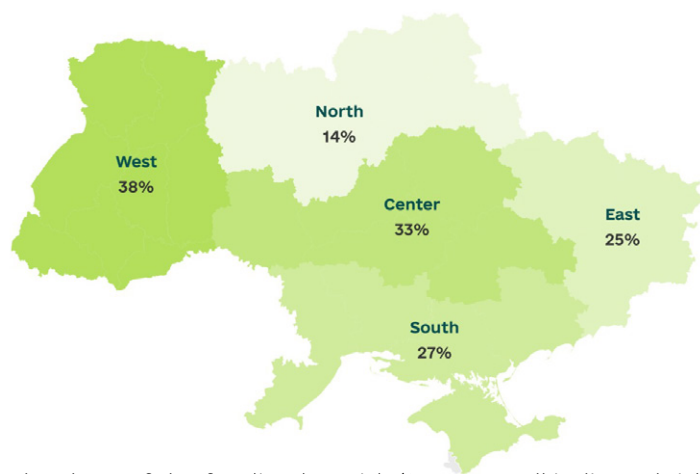
Pic. 2. The share of the funding loss risk (% among all indicated risks at each region) by Media Development Foundation

Based on the collected and analysed data, strategy for the group of international donors supporting Ukraine might consist of such elements as:

1) attention to the long-term institutional capacity support programs for local newsrooms that significantly contribute to the informational health of their communities and entire regions;

2) further analysis of the role of long-term institutional support as opposed to short-term aid in the form of grants-for-projects and emergency grants for local media outlets could contribute to understanding the situation in Ukraine's media landscape. The findings of Media Development Foundation surveys have shown that long-term institutional programs could provide local media outlets with more sustainable funding in times of crisis and opportunities for building long-term financial and growth plans. On the contrary, short-term assistance and constant competition for new donor funding opportunities may have negatively impacted the development of some small media organisations;

3) further analysis of informational health and timely updates to the existing research findings as the basis for targeting foreign development aid. Due to the war-related factors, defining the level of informational health of the local districts and communities is crucial for both media development and national resilience;

4) providing assistance and support considering the informational health of local areas and communities. Depending on the region's status, some areas, such as unhealthy regions or news deserts with limited access to critical information, might need media launch and relaunch programs. Conversely, support for existing organisations and initiatives might be necessary for informationally healthy areas to prevent them from transitioning into informationally unhealthy ones. For partially healthy regions, a combination of both

approaches might be beneficial. Therefore, considering the informational health of local districts and communities in Ukraine (healthy, partially healthy, and not healthy regions) and targeting foreign development aid programs according to the region's health status might maximize the assistance's positive impacts on media development in Ukraine.

1.7 The Ukrainian Local Media Market Logic and Hurdles

A series of research reports by MDF showed a critically high level of uncertainty about financial planning in times of war and also helped to identify the main risks and trends in 2023-2024. The key ones were the growing financial clustering of media outlets and the hastened and chaotic development of some editorial teams because of the constant involvement of new grant projects and their short-term nature.

The financial crisis for Ukrainian independent media outlets remains high in 2023. At least 233 media outlets ceased to exist during the full-scale invasion, many of them print newspapers [9]. The increase in the number of donor and charitable funding opportunities does not have a linear impact on the financial support of independent online media outlets, as it is influenced by many other factors in the media market.

Donor support in times of war and financial crisis has helped local independent editorial teams in Ukraine to survive. However, development aid has become one of the most significant factors in Ukraine's media development. The key characteristics of the 'grant' market in the media development sector, according to MDF's Financing of Online Media research [will be published soon]:

1. There are different hurdles for grant-supported media outlets. For some local publishers, the purpose of receiving donor support was to survive and meet basic needs, mainly salaries. The search for grant opportunities was constant, and the administrative burden of reporting and constant new commitments was high. Some other local publishers had a little more stability in their work with donors.

2. Accelerated and chaotic growth of some media organisations through project grants. The constant need to find new grants has become a regular agenda for most editorial teams. For some of them, project grants aimed at implementing a specific project have become an opportunity to maintain their existence. Nonetheless, such grants impose additional administrative obligations on the teams and change existing areas of work or even suspend them altogether. Project grants were sometimes combined with training and hiring new staff. Sometimes, editorial teams combined several projects at the same time.

3. Reported the short-term nature of grants and the lack of institutional funding that could allow the media to develop in one direction.

4. Exhaustion of editorial teams persistently functioning in survival mode. Mobilisation and staffing issues, saving funds on office rent, introduction of remote work, and the constant need for donor support have put some media outlets in what some have called a "war for funding." Some outlets noted that the workload on their teams was much greater than they could handle, primarily because of a lack of staff and the inability to plan long-term personnel policies and invest in the training and development of specialists involved in short-term projects.

"Before the full-scale war [pre-2022], we did not pay much attention to cooperation with donors. There were small projects for content production from time to time for the amounts of UAH 60-100,000 once a year or something. All the funds went to the authors' fees, and they were used as an incentive for people to get a slightly higher salary. And we were getting good content. Whereas now we are more dependent on donors,"
Media from the Western Ukraine, 2023

"I am looking for opportunities to attract grants to pay something extra to journalists as bonuses. Because the salary they get can only cover some basic needs. If we manage to get grants, I can pay from UAH 3-10,000 extra,"
Media from Southern Ukraine, 2023

5. The war-related workload of specialists in the local media outlets did not decrease in 2023. The level of crisis remained high. At the regional level, donor support for most editorial teams has become the only way to ensure the level of salaries established in the regions. Media outlets are also unable to provide their employees with remuneration that is aligned with the complexity of the work they do. This also applies to those editorial offices that do not receive grant support and yet operate in the high danger zone in Ukraine's East and provide access to information from these areas close to the combat actions.

1.8 Theory of Change for Community Media Development in Ukraine

According to the United Nations Development Group, a theory of change is a method that explains how a given intervention, or set of interventions, is expected to lead to specific development change, drawing on a causal analysis based on available evidence [10].

The key principles of developing the theory of change, according to UNDG, are: 1) it should be developed consultatively to reflect the understanding of all relevant stakeholders; b) it should be grounded in, tested with, and revised based on robust evidence at all stages; and c) it should support continuous learning and improvement from program design to closure [10]. For the purposes of this research, the latter component uses the timeframe of not a particular program but rather the period of partial reconstruction during the ongoing full-scale war in Ukraine and possible post-war reconstruction.

The key steps for developing a theory of change are:

1. Focus on the change that is planned to be contributed,

2. Identify what is needed for the desired development change to happen,

3. Establish and make explicit the related key assumptions underpinning the theory of how change happens and the major risks that may affect it,

4. Identify partners and actors who will be most relevant for achieving each result, taking into account the related risks and assumptions [10].

The model of the theory of change might include the plan in the form of:

1) goals (the combination of the above-mentioned steps),

2) strategies (activities that are expected to lead to goals),

3) outcomes (expected results from the recommended activities),

4) constant reflection (reviewing the logic, relevance, context, and assumptions made) [11].

The generalised model of the theory of change for the purposes of this research includes the following elements:

Starting Point

High exposure of local communities in Ukraine to the risk of growing into informationally unhealthy areas and spreading the news deserts in time of war

Four Goals

→ Preventing news desert and ensuring the informational health of communities

→ Supporting development of community-centered media

→ Aiding the partial and post-war reconstruction processes in Ukraine

→ Democracy promotion in Ukraine nurtured by consistent independent local media development

Strategies

→ Outlining the most relevant understanding of the notion and roles of community media and developing framework for community-centered media based on communities´critical information needs

→ Work on possibilities to aid local communities and their local publisher with key stakeholders:

  • Civil society watchdog organizations working with communities and local newsrooms

  • International donors providing development aid for Ukraine

  • Existing local independent media outlets and local communities

→ Providing assistance for chosen communities at risk aimed at community media development, according to the informational health status

→ Aiding local newsrooms crucial for informational health of the communities, according to their most pressing needs

→ Using the experience of European community media for aiding Ukrainan media development and reconstruction

Outcomes

→ Advanced understanding of the notion of community media and its role in the society relevant for the Ukrainian context of partial reconstruction in times of war

→ Key stakeholders informed of the informational health of communities and contribute to the possibilities of assistance

→ Assistance provided for existing local newsrooms at risk and those covering critical informational needs, according to their needs

→ Cases of European community media outletsare used for media development and transformation in Ukraine

Reflection

All changes in local media landscape, informational health statues of communities and other factors are monitored and included into the model

Impact

→ Local communities benefit from the development of community media and transformation of communities' informational health status and critical information needs

→ Number of local districts categorised as news deserts decreased

→ Sustainability of community-centered media outlets increased and can be measured using indicators of financial and operational sustainability

→ Democratic transition and local decision-making nourished by strong community media landscape

Pic. 3-6. The theory of change presented in regard to

In the Policy Paper, the analysis of the Ukrainian context of local media development, as well as the investigation of sustainability and hardship patterns in European community media outlets, will allow us to fill the model with steps necessary to answer the key research question – how the media development in Ukraine, some parts of which are categorized as a news desert or are at risk of transitioning into that category, might be impacted so that the local communities could benefit from new or transformed local publishing initiatives.

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