



INDEPENDENCE, DEMOCRACY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: EXPLORING THE VIABILITY OF MEDIA COOPERATIVES IN LEBANON

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The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

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Introduction

Several years ago, Nabil Dajjani's assertion that media freedom in Lebanon was a myth (Dajjani, 2013)¹ required in-depth examination and validation. Today, in the aftermath of the October 17 uprising and the stark and even violent revelation of the oppressive nature of the Lebanese political system, such a claim is now obvious. The prevailing conditions for most residents of Lebanon are marked by diminishing public and civil liberties²³, a significant rise in socio-economic inequalities⁴, an inflation rate of 251% in July 2023⁵, and daily challenges due to an almost total lack of state-provided services. In turn, there is a heavy dependence on costly, privately offered, and monopolized alternatives. This situation is exacerbated by a deliberate lack of systemic response to the economic crisis⁶ and growing sectarian and social tensions⁷. These tensions are amplified by a prevailing narrative of cultural and sectarian provocation promoted by the current political elite. An arsenal of established mainstream media outlets, either owned or financially backed by influential figures within the political establishment, occupies a prominent position within a broader system of control. This system encompasses state institutions, informal social powers, religious organizations, and the media, all working together to maintain the current political order.

In recent years, and in parallel, the alternative media scene in Lebanon has been growing exponentially in both diversity of platforms and outreach. It has presented itself as a trustworthy and reliable source of news and has been in the forefront battling discourses propagated by the establishment and its media.⁸⁹¹⁰ However, this media still lacks a viable and sturdy infrastructure that would ensure its continuity, sustainability, and growth.¹¹ Looking at the alternative media as a unified body could be useful when considering the contrasts with the mainstream media that is owned and controlled by the political establishment. However, if we were to study the possibilities and areas of improvement and support for the alternative media in its particularities, it is important to look at the distinctions within the media in terms of models, organization, funding, focus, ideological leanings, and future objectives.

The models of alternative media available today in Lebanon rely almost exclusively on donor money. They range from those adopting traditional hierarchical modes of organization to others experimenting with

¹Nabil Dajjani, "The Myth of Media Freedom in Lebanon," Arab Media & Society, May 12, 2013, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/the-myth-of-media-freedom-in-lebanon/>.

²"Lebanon: Events of 2022," Human Rights Watch, January 12, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon>.

³Dario Sabaghi, "Is Freedom of Expression in Lebanon under Threat?," <https://www.newarab.com/>, February 9, 2023, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/freedom-expression-lebanon-under-threat>.

⁴ESCWA, "Inequality in Lebanon: An Ever-Growing Gap" (ESCWA, 2022), <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/inequality-lebanon-growing-gap-english.pdf>.

⁵TRADING ECONOMICS, "Lebanon Inflation Rate," Tradingeconomics.com, December 18, 2019, <https://tradingeconomics.com/lebanon/inflation-cpi>.

⁶World Bank, "Lebanon: Normalization of Crisis Is No Road to Stabilization," May 16, 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/05/16/lebanon-normalization-of-crisis-is-no-road-to-stabilization>.

⁷Patricia Karam, "The Threat of Renewed Sectarian Violence in Lebanon," Arab Center Washington DC, June 21, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-threat-of-renewed-sectarian-violence-in-lebanon/>.

⁸Diala Ahwach, "The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising" (Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>.

⁹Ghinwa Mikdashi, "A Study on the Alternative Media Platforms in Lebanon" (Arab Resource Center for Popular Arts, Maharat Foundation and DW Akademie, November 2020), <https://maharatfoundation.org/media/1883/study-on-alternative-media-in-lebanon.pdf>.

¹⁰Rany Ballout, "Alternative Media and Investigative Journalism in Lebanon," Arab Media & Society, April 18, 2023, <https://www.arabmediasociety.com/alternative-media-and-investigative-journalism-in-lebanon/>.

¹¹Diala Ahwach, "The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising" (Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>.

more democratic and horizontal organization.¹² They are also registered under different legal statuses. Some are registered as private commercial companies, others as civil not-for-profit companies or as non-governmental organizations. Few of them are not registered at all.¹³ Nonetheless, the question of media democratization--whether in terms of the economic model or reader relations--is alive in the minds of some pioneers in the alternative scene today. Indeed, the uncertainties about future developments in the field, sustainability of donor funding and local political developments demand a certain level of flexibility and adaptivity that makes adopting a rigid and final structure impossible.

The media crisis in Lebanon with all its particularities is not unique. Attempts to break out of commercial, partisan, or state control over media have stirred an international phenomenon among established as well as new media. Simultaneously, financial crises, the COVID-19 outbreak and the decrease in sales and investments in the press worldwide resulted in massive decline in numbers of publications, especially in community and local media.¹⁴ For example, a quarter of the newspapers have closed between 2004 and 2020 in the U.S. alone.¹⁵ The U.S. crisis hit community media the hardest and at least 1800 communities that used to have their local news outlets were left without one.¹⁶ In one of their published pamphlets, Co-operative UK argued that “the crisis in the media – both financial and ideological – was a moment of opportunity to bring cooperative structures and business models to the sector”¹⁷. Undeniably, news co-ops and reader-owned cooperatives have proved to be successful in multiple cases in the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Mexico, Canada, and Uruguay, and recently growing efforts have been noted in the US. Cooperative systems have adopted a hybrid approach, whereby new co-ops can be reader-owned (or partially owned by readers) while simultaneously relying on crowdfunding, grants, seed funding, and advertising.

The cooperative business model, though completely foreign to media institutions in Lebanon, is not foreign to the country itself nor to its working class. 1,238 cooperatives are registered in Lebanon, half of them are agricultural cooperatives and only 1 in 3 is active¹⁸. Amidst the sturdy times facing the country and the media, and within a challenging global and local context, this paper attempts to explore the potential of the cooperative model for the context of media in Lebanon. Acknowledging the lack of local case studies to test and build on, it studied a variety of models outside of Lebanon, and thoroughly explored their experiences in terms of organization, funding, decision making, editorial identity, ideological leanings and challenges. It later engaged in a political discussion with some journalists and legal experts from Lebanon to reflect on possible lessons learnt. It then draws on the combination of literature, case studies and political discussions to suggest a comprehensive framework for media

¹² Diala Ahwach, “The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising” (Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Rebecca Harvey, “Co-Op Journalism: The Role of User-Led and Member-Owned Media,” Co-operative News, September 30, 2020, <https://www.thenews.coop/150461/sector/co-op-journalism-the-role-of-user-led-and-member-owned-media/>.

¹⁵ Tom Stites, “A Quarter of All U.S. Newspapers Have Died in 15 Years, a New UNC News Deserts Study Found,” Poynter, June 24, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/locally/2020/unc-news-deserts-report-2020/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Rebecca Harvey, “Co-Op Journalism: The Role of User-Led and Member-Owned Media,” Co-operative News, September 30, 2020, <https://www.thenews.coop/150461/sector/co-op-journalism-the-role-of-user-led-and-member-owned-media/>.

¹⁸ Rita Jalkh, Marc Dedeire, and Melanie Requier Desjardins, “An Introduction to Food Cooperatives in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon: Territorial Actors and Potential Levers to Local Development through Culinary Heritage,” Food Ethics 5, no. 1-2 (September 19, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41055-020-00079-0>.

cooperatives. This framework can function as an inspiration for those interested in adopting the model for the local context of Lebanon. This paper considers itself a first contribution to a discussion that needs to take place proactively within the currently established alternative media platforms and beyond. It targets independent journalists and media activists in Lebanon whose political positioning puts them in direct confrontation with the country's ruling elite and whose values and ideological leanings are in harmony with what models of economic cooperation present.

Methodology

Approach

This research is conducted in a context with very little to no documented experience around cooperative news media in Lebanon. For that reason, this research follows Grounded Theory methodology, with the ultimate aim of developing a theoretical framework that details barriers and enablers to successful media cooperatives and applying that analysis to the Lebanon context. Throughout the research, the research tools, methods, and participants were revisited as the data was collected and unfolded. This method has proven to be informative when examining the reality of the studied subject, given that the research deals with an undeveloped field, changing realities and open unrealized possibilities.

Desk Review

As part of the methodology, a thorough desk review of both academic and grey literature was first conducted in order to situate the research among existing resources, as well as to map existing media cooperatives. The desk review and search strategy covered:

1. An overview of cooperative news media, including general literature around the cooperative model, definitions and history of cooperative news media, a mapping of models of cooperative news media, facilitating factors and challenges, and any recorded examples of media cooperatives.
2. An exploration of the cooperative infrastructure in Lebanon, including existing legal frameworks, and any facilitating factors and barriers to applying the cooperative model.
3. A review of the media landscape in Lebanon, including alternative and traditional media outlets and models.

Qualitative data collection

Key informant interviews were conducted with 6 media cooperatives and a media initiative working on cooperatives that were identified through the desk review and mapping. Interview guides were informed by the reviewed literature. The interviews were written up into case studies which were then used, along with the desk review, to inform the analytical model that was then applied to the Lebanon context. The analysis was also supplemented with semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders from Lebanon. The

interviews were led in an informal manner aiming at triggering a grounded political discussion and meditated thinking process. Considering the absence of media cooperative examples in Lebanon, stakeholders in Lebanon served as analytical tools to project possible benefits and challenges for the model and to critically understand the legal, political, economic, social and media context in which cooperatives would operate. A virtual panel featuring representatives from four cooperatives, each of whom had also undergone individual interviews, was collaboratively arranged in conjunction with the Solidarity Directory¹⁹. The insights and questions posed by the participants were duly factored into the subsequent analysis.

Limitations

The case studies interviewed in this research are all situated in the global north. Language barriers prevented the ability to reach out to a more diverse set of examples. Additionally limited literature on the topic necessitated the reliance solely on the interviews and the cooperatives websites for the data. A larger pool of cooperatives was contacted, and the interviewed ones are those that answered the email request for an interview.

A detailed analysis of the alternative media environment in Lebanon is not within the scope of this research. To substitute the inability to speak firsthand with the pioneers of the currently established alternative media, this research has been informed by previously published research: *The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising: Can the rising alternative groups fight the ruling elite's control over media?*²⁰. A real exploration of the potential of the cooperative model for the context of Lebanon necessitates an open discussion and a collective brainstorming among media activists and cannot be limited to individual analytical efforts. In that sense, this paper aims at introducing the concept and facilitating the thinking process of possibly interested parties.

An overview of cooperative news media

Researching cooperative news media results in a multiplicity of articles discussing if this model constitutes the future for news media organizations^{21,22} or even the savior of community/local media.²³ Ellen Kaiser (2019) described those beginning to examine the cooperative model as a potential “future” model for news organizations as “forward thinking”.²⁴ An issue of “Work Together”, a newsletter published by the International Organization of Industrial and Service Cooperatives (CICOPA) suggests that the cooperative

¹⁹ Solidarity directory is a local NGO with the aim to “promote and support cooperatives, local producers, collectives, social enterprises, and local small and medium businesses in order to empower local communities”. Check: <https://daleeltadamon.com>

²⁰ Check: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>

²¹ “May the cooperative model save the local media industry?,” The International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives (CICOPA), January 15, 2019, <https://www.cicopa.coop/news/may-the-cooperative-model-save-the-local-media-industry/>.

²² Hazel Sheffield, “Are Media Coops the Business Model of the Future?,” Columbia Journalism Review, September 13, 2019, https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/new-internationalist.php.

²³ Fouquet, E., Michaud, M., Audebrand, L.K., & Guillotte, C-A. (2021). Cooperative conversation in the newspaper industry: Navigating between the reefs towards success. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(4), 82-91.

²⁴ Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, “Media Cooperatives: Challenges and Opportunities,” Medium, February 8, 2019, <https://medium.com/@jgksfconsulting/media-cooperatives-challenges-and-opportunities-e6803c0716ae>.

model has the potential to save the local media industry and discusses its possible usefulness amidst the multidimensional crisis faced by the industry today with examples from Argentina, Poland, Belgium, Uruguay, Japan and India.²⁵ The Banyan Project in the U.S. attempts to pioneer the adaptation of the cooperative model for community journalism and reports being approached by over 40 communities interested in the model in an attempt to solve what they described as the “relentless spread of news deserts”.²⁶ Additionally, an increase of 27% in the number of cooperatives active in the field of information and communication was reported in CICOPA’s Global Reports of 2015 and 2017²⁷. This number includes cooperative enterprises that are active in the technology and communications sector and is not limited to the field of journalism. However, it is still indicative of a growing interest in employing the cooperative model to the fast-changing technology and information sector in its varieties and has been also linked to an interest in the “democratization of the digital economy”.²⁸

Some of the current discussion is motivated by an apparent global crisis that continues to face journalism, the press, and the publishing industry in general.²⁹ The technological advancement and the advent of digital information sharing challenged the traditional modes of running the media. This pushed to digitizing the press and transformed drastically the world of written and audiovisual media.³⁰ This by itself is not the problem; rather, the problem lies in the abundance of free of charge content online, social media constituting a main source of information for the youth, and the move of advertisers from newspapers and online press to social media.³¹ This is all coupled with an increased mistrust in mainstream media and a growing public skepticism towards both media funded by big capital and public service media controlled by states, which has ultimately translated into an accelerating decline in subscriptions.³² Another big issue lies in the deteriorating working conditions of journalists characterized by precarious contracts³³³⁴, increased informality in the sector and inability of media companies to provide dignified salaries.

²⁵ For the entire issue of “Work Together”, check: [https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?e=\[UNIQID\]&u=3a463471cd0a9c6cf744bf5f8&id=fa5bf03121#](https://us2.campaign-archive.com/?e=[UNIQID]&u=3a463471cd0a9c6cf744bf5f8&id=fa5bf03121#)

²⁶Tom Stites, “A New Business Model Emerges: Meet the Digital News Co-Op,” Global Investigative Journalism Network, March 25, 2021, <https://gijn.org/2021/03/25/a-new-business-model-emerges-meet-the-digital-news-co-op/>.

²⁷ Elisa Terrasi and Eum Hyungsik, “Industrial and Service Cooperatives: Global Report 2015 - 2016” (CICOPA, 2017), <https://www.cicopa.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Global-REPORT-2015-2016-2019-corrections.pdf>.

²⁸ “Information and Communication: A Glance at the Most Recent Sectoral Trends - CICOPA,” www.cicopa.coop, November 1, 2018, <https://www.cicopa.coop/news/information-and-communication-a-glance-at-the-most-recent-sectoral-trends/>.

²⁹ Fouquet, E., Michaud, M., Audebrand, L.K., & Guillotte, C-A. (2021). Cooperative conversation in the newspaper industry: Navigating between the reefs towards success. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(4), 82-91.

³⁰ Robert G. Picard, “Digitization and Media Business Models” (Open Society Foundations, July 2011), <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/226aec3a-9d1f-4cc0-b9a1-1ad9ccdda55/digitization-media-business-models-20110721.pdf>.

³¹Vanessa Baird, “A Better Media Is Possible,” *New Internationalist*, June 2, 2018, <https://newint.org/features/2018/06/01/a-better-media-is-possible>.

³²Nic Newman, “Overview and Key Findings of the 2022 Digital News Report,” Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 15, 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022/dnr-executive-summary>.

³³Diamantopoulos, M., Bird, A. & Bibby, A. (2021). Constructing the co-operative imaginary: Journalism’s past, present, and emerging contributions [Editorial]. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(4), 3-6.

³⁴ “May the cooperative model save the local media industry?,” *The International Organisation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives* (CICOPA), January 15, 2019, <https://www.cicopa.coop/news/may-the-cooperative-model-save-the-local-media-industry/>.

Cooperative news media and movements: a brief history

A discussion that is highly motivated by a market shift can sometimes be purely based on profitability and sustainability motives. However, in essence, the concept of news cooperatives predates the ongoing crisis and is rooted in a larger historical cooperative movement. It is highly linked to social movements, unionizing efforts, and majorly anti-capitalist political mobilization.

The first ideas of a cooperative press date back to the early days of the British cooperative movement. The pioneers of British cooperation themselves – Robert Owen, William King, Henry Hetherington, and George Holyoake – were media activists as well as cooperators.³⁵ Diamantopoulos (2021) argues that the alternative media of the cooperative movement of nineteenth-century Britain played a prefigurative role to install the ideals of cooperation, solidarity, and mutualism into the consciousness of the working class.³⁶ Nineteenth-century Britain witnessed what has been called “a small army of co-operative chronicles, magazines and miscellanies”.³⁷ In the beginning, this press took the form of the “educator” and “propagandist” of the movement. Its main function was to educate the working class on cooperation, recruit workers to the movement, and hence foster the establishment of additional cooperative enterprises while countering mainstream narratives and media. Similarly, cooperative press attempts have long predated the launching of the Co-operative Printing Society in 1869, which printed the Co-operative News two years later. Co-operative News is the oldest running media co-operative, and its establishment marked the transformation of movement press into established, sustainable valid forms of media organization. The Co-operative News was the cooperative movement’s first national newspaper, adopting a multi-stakeholder (owned by other cooperative societies and individual members) it guaranteed a democratic yet solid relationship with the movement and a solid financial grounding. Today, the Co-operative News is currently known as the Co-op News and will be discussed further as a case study later on in this paper.

This cooperative news media movement predates the Rochdale Cooperative and its pioneers, who set the values principles that are still considered to be the foundations of modern- day cooperatives: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity.³⁸ The cooperative principles and values of the Rochdale Pioneers continued to influence the movement worldwide for years to come. However, bodies for international cooperation started to form as early on as 1895 when the first International Cooperative Congress was held. The International Cooperative Alliance is still one of the few international organizations to survive both the first and second World Wars in a clear demonstration of the ongoing strength of the movement. After multiple revisions of the cooperative principles and values, members of cooperatives from all types and all over the world gathered in 1994 to turn the Rochdale principles into a set of shared principles: Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic and Member Control, Member Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education Training and

³⁵ Diamantopoulos, M. (2021). Holyoake’s Ghost: Remembering press activism’s role in the invention, cultural empowerment, and social mobilization of Britain’s cooperative movement, 1821-1871. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(4), 7-19.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, “Media Cooperatives: Challenges and Opportunities,” Medium, February 8, 2019, <https://medium.com/@jgksfconsulting/media-cooperatives-challenges-and-opportunities-e6803c0716ae>.

Information, Cooperation Among Cooperatives, and Concern for Community³⁹. The International Cooperative Alliance defines coops as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise”.⁴⁰

Cooperative models usually fall into one of three categories, defined by their funding source: consumer-owned, worker- or employee-owned, or multi-stakeholder-owned coops:

Consumer-owned cooperatives are owned by consumers, who in this case can be readers or any other consumers of the media. In this model, the cooperative is usually funded by membership fees, and sometimes through donations, grants, or advertisement revenue.

Worker-owned cooperatives are owned and organized by media employees, including journalists, who can receive salaries through the cooperative revenue. In this case, the workers control the cooperatives. These cooperatives can also be funded by membership fees, donations, grants, or advertisement revenue.

Finally, the most common model of media cooperative funding is multi-stakeholder-owned, in which the cooperatives are co-owned and funded by multiple actors, including both employees and readers.

Table 1 below lists some of the more prominent media cooperatives from around the world, as well as the characteristics of each cooperative model. Cooperative locations highlighted in orange are higher-income countries, those highlighted in yellow are middle-income, while those highlighted in blue are in low- to middle-income countries⁴¹. Most cooperatives located in this mapping belong to and operate in higher-income countries, leaving little models or examples of how media cooperatives could possibly look or function in lower-income contexts and further highlighting the need for exploratory research around the feasibility and adaptability of these models.

Highlighted cooperatives will be explored in greater detail as case studies later in this paper.

Table 1

| Name | Location | Established | Cooperative model | Focus and media |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|
| La Jornada | Mexico | 1984 | Worker-owned | Daily published print and online media |
| Brazil Popular | Brazil | 2015 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Daily published online media |

³⁹ “Guidance Notes to the Cooperative Principle” (International Cooperative Alliance, 2015), <https://ica.coop/sites/default/files/2021-11/ICA%20Guidance%20Notes%20EN.pdf>.

⁴⁰ International Cooperative Alliance, “What Is a Cooperative? | ICA,” ica.coop, 2019, <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/what-is-a-cooperative>.

⁴¹ According to World Bank country income classifications

| | | | | |
|---|---------------|------|-------------------------|---|
| La Diaria | Uruguay | 2006 | Worker-owned | Daily published print and online media, covers issues of citizen rights not covered in mainstream media |
| Brecha | Uruguay | 1985 | Worker-owned | Weekly published print and online media, independent and left-wing newspaper covering Latin American issues |
| Daily Herald Press | United States | 2001 | Worker-owned | Daily published online media |
| Wisconsin Citizens Media Cooperative | United States | 2011 | Worker-owned | Weekly published online media |
| Fourth Estate | United States | 2011 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Daily published online media |
| NB Media Co-operative | Canada | 2008 | Consumer-owned | Weekly published online media |
| The Media Co-op | Canada | 2006 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Online media |
| Hullabaloo Publishing Worker's Co-operative | Canada | - | Worker-owned | Two bi-weekly publications covering issues not covered by mainstream media |
| Apache | Belgium | 2009 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Daily published online media |
| Medor | Belgium | 2014 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Monthly published print and online media |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------|------|-------------------------|---|
| New Internationalist | United Kingdom | 1973 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Print and online media, newspaper issues published approximately once per month |
| The Co-operative News | United Kingdom | 1871 | Consumer-owned | Online published media, news about cooperatives in the UK and globally |
| Bristol Cable | United Kingdom | 2014 | Consumer-owned | Print and online media published quarterly |
| Ethical Consumer | United Kingdom | - | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Monthly published online media |
| Sheffield Live | United Kingdom | 2003 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Television and daily published online media |
| Positive News | United Kingdom | - | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Weekly published print and online media |
| The Ferret | Scotland | 2006 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Investigative journalism, online media |
| West Highland Free Press | Scotland | 2009 | Worker-owned | Daily published print and online media |
| The Taz | Germany | 1978 | Consumer-owned | Daily published print and online media |
| Junge Welt | Germany | 1947 | - | Daily published print and online media, left-wing newspaper |
| Krautreporter | Germany | 2014 | Consumer-owned | Daily published online media |
| RiffReporter | Germany | 2017 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Daily published online media |

| | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--|
| Woz | Switzerland | 1981 | Worker-owned | Weekly published print and online media, left-wing newspaper |
| El Critic | Spain | 2015 | Worker-owned | Daily published online media |
| La Marea | Spain | 2012 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Daily published print and online media |
| Alternativas económicas | Spain | 2013 | Worker-owned | Daily published online media |
| Alternatives économiques | France | 1980 | Worker-owned | Monthly published online media |
| Il manifesto | Italy | 1969 | Worker-owned | Daily published print and online media |
| WNet | Poland | 2009 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Radio, daily published online media |
| Community Media Trust (CMT) | India | 7 years at article | Worker-owned | Video-based media screened in community and farming villages, owned by rural women |
| Press Trust of India | India | 1947 | - | Daily published online media |
| Japan Agricultural News | Japan | 1928 | - | Daily published online media, information about the agricultural sector |
| Mutual Interest Media Cooperative | Worldwide | 2020 | Multi-stakeholder-owned | Online media |

Cooperatives in Lebanon

In Lebanon, a legal framework that organizes and governs the cooperative sector has been in place since 1964. Decree 17199 defines cooperatives as “any non-profit association composed of persons, having a variable capital, established according to the provisions of the present law whose objective is the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of its members by joining their efforts according to the general principles of cooperation.”⁴² Cooperatives are exempt from profit tax, municipal rent tax, and municipal construction tax by law, as well as from contract finance fees and owned real estate tax. Cooperatives are supervised and monitored by the Directorate General of Cooperatives, which oversees registration, permits, and financial support. Cooperatives are represented through the Lebanese Federation of Cooperatives, which currently lacks the appropriate resources for impactful action. In addition, a National Union for Cooperative Credit does exist, but membership has been frozen for several decades.

Decree 17199/1964 specifies that:⁴³

- The value of the share in a cooperative is fixed.
- Each member of the cooperative has one vote, regardless of the number of shares owned by that member.
- A member cannot own more than 1/5th of shares.
- A member of the cooperative can be a consumer or a worker, depending on the cooperative by-law.
- The main goal is improving the socioeconomic conditions of the cooperative’s members.

Establishing cooperatives requires submitting a request at the Directorate General of Cooperatives, including a feasibility study, which must be approved and published officially before being registered. Registered cooperatives must have developed by-laws as well as a specific internal governance structure defined within the Decree 17199/1964 (including a general assembly, board of directors, executive board, and other governance and voting procedures specified within the decree).

The current national legislation on cooperatives in Lebanon is described as theoretically “very much cooperative friendly” according to an analysis conducted by the International Co-operative Alliance in 2020⁴⁴. However, the lack of monitoring of the enforcement of the legislation is notable, as well as the lack of the incorporation of gender equality.

Despite the obvious existence of a cooperative sector in Lebanon, it is mostly limited to agricultural and agro-food cooperatives operating in rural areas, with the Ministry of Agriculture taking over the role of financial support from the Directorate General of Cooperatives. In fact, since the 1960s, the Lebanese State has generally encouraged the development of cooperatives mostly as a means to address rural

⁴² Legal Framework Analysis, National Report – Lebanon. International Co-operative Alliance, Asia and Pacific. 2020, <https://coops4dev.coop/sites/default/files/2021-06/Lebanon%20Legal%20Framework%20Analysis%20National%20Report.pdf>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

poverty. However, the lack of any concrete policies around rural and agricultural development has also led to this cooperative movement being led by either political elite or by initiatives by donors. This trend has been described as a significant obstacle to the growth of a nationwide cooperative movement⁴⁵, despite the fact that in some cases, cooperatives have been crucial elements towards social change.

The potential of cooperatives to play essential roles in social change has become even more pronounced following the October 17 uprising. The conditions of the uprising, as well as its aftermath, have favored the generation of bottom-up, grassroots movements, particularly in the period following the demobilization of revolutionary protest movements. Movements that are participatory, self-organized, and rooted in the community have become a viable and favorable option for activists in the opposition seeking ways to organize that are alternatives to parliamentary politics. Against this backdrop, cooperatives gained increasing traction as alternative, sustainable, and transformative economic models which are free from exploitative chains of production under capitalism, and which can be rooted in “revolutionary” values such as democracy, self-sufficiency, equity, and solidarity. Initiatives such as Daleel Tadamon, an initiative concerned with mapping cooperatives and solidarity movements in Lebanon, grew quickly.⁴⁶ A brief window of political opportunity showcased the potential for individuals to engage in solidarity initiatives and mutual cooperation. Yet, as the revolutionary fervor subsided and the political establishment reasserted its control over both politics and the economy, these discussions waned, giving way once again to more conventional political pathways.

Media cooperatives: cases from around the world⁴⁷

In order to better understand the enablers and barriers to media cooperative organization, it is necessary to root this study in the lived experiences of media cooperatives and cooperative organizers from around the world. The following case studies provide in-depth insight into the organization, funding, decision making, editorial identity, ideological leanings and challenges faced by each cooperative. Through these cases, a better picture of the different models, success factors, and challenges for media cooperatives can be deduced. The case studies are also summarized in Table B below.

The case study of Taz⁴⁸ - 24,000 Reader Owner

“We had two priorities: minimizing hierarchies and ensuring that readers providing the funding have their rights acknowledged”, Konny Gellenbeck, Co-Founder of Taz and Head of Taz Panter Stiftung.

ARE YOU THE TAZ? A question directed to readers in a pamphlet shared with me by one of Taz’ oldest employees, Konny Gellenbeck. A simple question, yet it holds most of what Taz and similar media cooperatives stand for, or at least try to. Taz newspaper was founded in 1979 by a group of young activists

⁴⁵Kanj Hamade, Jad Chaaban, and Lina Srouf, “The Co-Operative Sector in Lebanon: What Role? What Future?” (International Labour Organization, 2018), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_644724.pdf.

⁴⁶ Check: <https://daleeltadamon.org/>

⁴⁷ Interviews took place between March and June 2022. Some information and numbers may have changed.

⁴⁸ The case study is based on the website and available official documents of the Taz, and an in-depth interview with Konny Gellenbeck, Co-founder of Taz Newspaper and Head of the Taz Panter Stiftung.

from the women's rights, anti-nuclear, and other movements of the time. Initially, they called for people to invest in the project through pre-paid yearly subscriptions. In that sense, the readers of Taz were its creditors. After a six months campaign, 7,000 people responded to the call, and Taz saw first light as a regular, left-leaning, daily newspaper. At the beginning, employees worked without pay and were not professional journalists--just activists angry with how mainstream media covered their movements who decided to create their own media.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, Taz was faced with a new difficult political reality, particularly with the scarcity of opportunities to fund left leaning media. In 1992, they decided to form the Taz cooperative. Today, Taz newspaper is published by the cooperative and is owned by over 24,000 cooperative members.

Membership

When Taz cooperative was founded, 3,000 readers became cooperative members/co-owners. Ever since, they continuously ask readers to become members of the cooperative. In this regard, Konny Gellenbeck comments: "We live off the solidarity of our readers. We are a small newspaper; we don't have much money". Today, the Taz cooperative has 24,000 members⁴⁹. The membership cost ranges from 500 euros to 100,000 euros. However, each member gets one vote regardless of the amount of money they invest.

The cooperative has two types of membership:

- 1- Consumer membership: readers of Taz are invited to become members by buying shares. In return, they get to become part of Taz General Assembly that holds a yearly meeting in September where they get updated on all the coop's news, budgets, and financial status. They also get to vote for the supervisory board. Reader members don't intervene in editorial or recruitment decisions. According to Gellenbeck, every week the readers see where their money is going: "by reading and consuming the print and digital editions, they get back on their investment".
- 2- Producer membership: After one year of joining Taz, employees are granted the right to join the cooperative and they become part of the Employee Assembly. The rights of the members in the Employee Assembly are considered special, meaning that they cannot be revoked by changing the related articles in the bylaws without the consent of three quarters of the members of the employee association. The Employee Assembly elects 3 out of 5 members of the board of directors and manages the day-to-day operation of the cooperative. Also, the Employee Assembly has the right to veto major decisions taken by both the board of directors and the supervisory board.

Financial Independency

80% of the cooperative's revenue is generated by subscriptions, 10% by selling advertising space and another 10% from the sales in the Taz shop. Currently, over 100,000 people a year give money to the cooperative in different forms. For example, in 2011, they launched a voluntary payment option which helped raise money while keeping the access to all articles free. They actively took a decision to refuse any paywalls or restriction on access.

As Gellenbeck explains, they have a very strict line in their advertising: they only accept ecological advertising that does not contradict with the editorial line of rejecting racism and anti-feminism.

The reliance on subscriptions as the major source of income comes at a price. Gellenbeck describes the problem in the most straightforward expression: "We need to make sure that everyone gets more

⁴⁹ According to an interview with Konny Gellenbeck .

money". The average salary of a journalist in the Taz is considered below the average in other major newspapers in the country. However, they also follow a specific remuneration policy that ensures the absence of major salary discrepancies within the organization. They thus have 8 different salaries with the difference between the highest and the lowest salary being only 2,000 euros. The low salaries result in a high turnover where people enter as fresh graduates and leave a few years later, seeking better-paid positions. There's a saying describing The Taz as the "journalism working school of Germany", Gellenbeck indicates.

The Case Study of Woz⁵⁰ - Workers Owned Media Cooperative

“We were carried by the youth movement - they grew older and they’re still supporting Woz. It is this kind of solidarity that makes us possible”, Camille Roseau, Marketing Manager at WOZ Die Wochenzeitung.

Woz describes itself as the “largest left-wing and independent newspaper in Switzerland”.⁵¹ Woz was founded in 1981 out of the 80s students’ movement, and is not owned by or directly affiliated with any particular political party, union or alliance on the left. However, they are editorially keen on covering social movements and union demands. Woz is a weekly newspaper that targets the German speaking population of Switzerland. The newspaper is published by the cooperative “Infolink,” and is owned by its members – the cooperative’s workers.

The highest authority in the cooperative organigram is the “plenum”, which includes all members. Any employee working two days or more a week becomes a member of the plenum by default, and enjoys the same rights as the full-time workers. Strategic managerial decisions are discussed democratically in the plenum; however, day-to-day operations are managed by a unique managerial structure that has been in place for a few years. The structure is a mix of small specialized elected committees. For example, the structure includes an editorial board composed of three editors which has the authority to review and edit content but does not have the right to refuse publishing any article. The newspaper could be considered medium-sized, with 50 people working part-time and 30 full-time employees.

One Salary for All

At Woz, all the employees get paid the same salary, which is 6,000 Francs per month (equivalent to 6,200 US dollars). According to Camille Roseau, Marketing and Cooperation Manager at Woz, the salary is considered to be acceptable according to the Switzerland standards, although it does not meet the salary scale of other journalists in the country. The equal pay for all policy in Woz makes it a remarkable example, especially as the cooperative has been able to sustain itself, provide decent salaries, and adopt an internal structure where greater responsibilities are not met with higher compensations. “We usually don’t have many candidates for the ‘managerial’ positions, since it means much more work with the same salary”, Ruseau comments. Consequently, the choice of taking up a ‘managerial’ position is motivated by the person’s interest in playing a bigger role towards the organization’s success and their own willingness to stand up and make decisions for the team. They also do not hold an election with candidates running against each other; rather, people are nominated from a pool of suggested names in order to prevent competitiveness being the drive behind the pursuit of the position.

⁵⁰ The case study is based on the website and available official documents of Woz, and an in-depth interview with Camille Roseau, Marketing Manager at WOZ Die Wochenzeitung.

⁵¹ “A Mission Statement | WOZ Die Wochenzeitung,” www.woz.ch, n.d., <https://www.woz.ch/info/leitbild>.

Financial Independency

Woz' revenue division is similar to Taz. Woz readers are its primary financiers with 80% of the revenue generated by subscription sales. The remaining 20% are equally divided between selling advertising space and donations.

Donations to fund journalistic research are processed through ProWoz, a development organization affiliated with the newspaper. Subscribers to Woz are given the choice to pay a double subscription to become members of ProWoz. Today, the 850 members elect a board that is responsible for approving external donations and funding opportunities. According to Roseau, the ProWoz organization adds an extra layer of filtering to guarantee the complete independence of the newspaper, even in the cases where they acquire external funding.

Despite being a worker's cooperative, Woz prioritizes their relationship with the readers. As mentioned in their mission statement "WOZ is far more dependent than other newspapers on the commitment of its creators and on a close relationship with the readers".⁵² The ProWoz foundation is one of the tools used to maintain this relationship. They also communicate with readers twice a year. This communication is not formalized, they nonetheless try to be "authentic" in their communication. Their readership base is heavily linked to the community that founded the cooperative: "The people from the student movement of the 80's got older and they're now supporting us", Roseau comments. She continues to describe how this community feels like Woz is their newspaper, as the printed copy became part of their homes and routine. Roseau gives an example of parents buying subscriptions for their kids once they go to college, to give them a piece of home in their new journey. WOZ thus succeeded in building a community around itself and this has been a major factor of its success and sustainability. Roseau believes that they are carried by this kind of solidarity and commitment and that this is what made it possible for them to grow.

⁵² "A Mission Statement | WOZ Die Wochenzeitung," www.woz.ch, n.d., <https://www.woz.ch/info/leitbild>.

The case study of “The Ferret”⁵³ – A cooperative for investigative journalism

“We wanted to find out if people were willing to pay for investigative journalism”, Billy Briggs, Co-Editor of The Ferret.

In 2015, five freelance journalists decided to come together and establish a website for investigative journalism in Scotland. The events of the Scottish independence referendum the previous year, highlighted the need for what they term as a “neutral” platform. Briggs explains that at the time of the referendum, media in the UK became extremely polarized and the debate very divisive. They were starkly aware of that reality when they decided to embark on the journey of creating The Ferret. Consequently, they describe The Ferret to be “a platform for investigative journalism in Scotland and Beyond” committed to “non-partisan, fact based, public interest journalism”.⁵⁴

The founders of the Ferret wanted to involve the readers from the very beginning of the project. They published a list of topics for potential investigations and asked people to vote on their preferences. They later crowdfunded the needed budget to undertake the chosen investigation. They originally asked for 3,800 U.K. Pounds and ended up raising around 9,000 pounds, which was enough to fund two investigations instead of just one. This direct response to the community’s priorities allowed The Ferret to have a strong and committed subscriptions base. Seven years into the project, they have more than 2,000 subscribers/co-owners, and the number has been growing steadily still.

Today, the Ferret is co-owned by its readers and journalists in a hybrid membership model. The membership model of The Ferret is divided into two types: Reader members and Journalists members. The Reader members vote for their representatives – the Reader Directors - in the board. Similarly, the Journalists members vote for the Journalists Directors. It is designed in a way that maintains editorial personnel and dependency solely in the hands of the journalists themselves while giving the reader directors a provisional and managerial authority. While the editorial committee, formed by the journalists, is responsible for day-to-day editorial decisions, the reader directors are the only ones authorized to deal with complaints received by The Ferret. The election of the directors takes place yearly in the Annual General Meeting.

When it comes to their remuneration policy, the employees are all paid a salary equivalent to the average wage in Scotland. Only recently, they have introduced an additional pay of two days per month for the editors to compensate for the additional time and responsibilities their position requires.

Financial Resources

Subscriptions are only 30% of the Ferret’s income. The other 70% comes from other sources; mainly grants and collaborations. In 2017, they were awarded a grant from Google to establish a fact-checking service.

⁵³ The case study is based on the website and available official documents of The Ferret, and an in-depth interview with Camille Roseau, Marketing Manager at WOZ Die Wochenzeitung.

⁵⁴ “About Us | the Ferret,” theferret.scot, May 26, 2015, <https://theferret.scot/about-us/>.

This service is used to debunk or prove massively shared assumptions or allegations. It is accredited by the International Fact-Checking Network fact-checkers' code of principles. They also worked with the BBC on a project tackling citizen journalism and they regularly co-publish with local media. They are in negotiations with a local university on potentially developing and teaching a course on investigative journalism.

The Ferret does not accept any kind of advertising as they consider it contradictory to the mandate of investigative journalism.

An Increasingly Challenging Environment

Brexit, the war on Ukraine, and growing inflation have already had its toll on the Ferret. "It's a squeeze on people's income", Briggs indicates. As a result, people have been canceling their subscriptions because they cannot afford it anymore. This has disrupted their continuous growth since 2015. They had a plan on expanding their subscription base to fully cover their salaries by 2025, however, they will now have to reconsider this aim.

The case study of Co-op News⁵⁵ – A press from and to the movement.

“Our aim is to inform cooperatives about what is happening in the world of cooperatives and in their respective sectors.”, Anca Voinea, International Editor of the Co-op News

The inception of Co-operative News traces its roots back to the early stages of the cooperative movement in the UK. Established in 1871, a few decades after the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, Co-operative News emerged during a thriving period for cooperatives in the UK and worldwide. It aimed to serve as the primary press outlet for this movement. Published by Co-operative Press Ltd, Co-operative News is dedicated to keeping cooperatives well-informed about the latest developments within their sectors and the broader cooperative landscape. As a specialized news cooperative, its coverage spans various topics, including pertinent issues, trends, and insightful analyses relevant to cooperatives in the UK and across the globe. In addition, Co-operative News also provides coverage of breaking news and global trends from the perspective of cooperatives. For instance, topics such as the war on Ukraine, climate change, and sustainable development goals are approached through the lens of cooperatives' involvement and impact.

The history of Co-operative Press Ltd, and by extension Co-operative News, is deeply intertwined with the origins and legacy of the cooperative movement in the UK. It is considered one of the earliest expressions of the movement's efforts to mobilize political support and keep a growing number of supporters informed about its progress, in the face of mounting challenges. Building upon previous endeavors that had limited success, the establishment of the Co-operative Newspaper Society, later known as Co-operative Press, marked a significant milestone in launching a journal guided by the movement itself⁵⁶. During this period, the Co-operative Newspaper Society (CNS) not only published Co-operative News but also a range of other publications, highlighting the increasing demand for effective communication within a thriving cooperative ecosystem. Notably, Co-operative Press, the publisher of Co-operative News, operates as a cooperative in its own right, with individual cooperative societies comprising its membership base.

Co-operative News began its journey as a daily newspaper, but due to the mounting challenges encountered by the cooperative movement, it underwent a transformation. It transitioned first into a weekly publication, and later adopted a bimonthly format. Presently, Co-operative News is a monthly magazine, accompanied by its online counterpart, The Co-op News, which was launched in 2011. This online platform enables the cooperative to disseminate more time-sensitive news stories, keeping its readers well-informed with the latest updates. Despite the adjustments in frequency, Co-op News remains the longest-running media cooperative.

⁵⁵ The case study is based on the website and available official documents of Co-op News, and an in-depth interview with Anca Voinea, International Editor of the Co-op News.

⁵⁶ Webster, A. (2021). Speaking for co-operation: The rise of the co-operative press. *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, 54(4), 20-27.

Subscription Equates Membership

To become a direct member of Co-op News, individuals can subscribe on their website. The membership base of Co-op News encompasses both individuals and cooperatives. Corporate subscriptions provide members of respective cooperatives with access to the magazine, with pricing determined through negotiations based on the size of the cooperative's membership base.

Subscribers/members receive a monthly hard copy of the magazine and are also granted a username and password, enabling them to actively engage with other members on the website by commenting and participating in discussions. Additionally, they become members in the general assembly and have the opportunity to attend the Annual General Meeting, where they can exercise their voting rights on significant business-related decisions. Although their editorial input is primarily limited to suggestions and feedback, they are considered an essential source of information and suggestions for the journal.

Co-operative News positions itself as the media outlet of the cooperative movement in the UK, emphasizing its commitment to fostering engagement and facilitating active communication with cooperatives and their members. They prioritize the publication of press releases and announcements from cooperatives, ensuring their dissemination to a wider audience. While the majority of both corporate and individual members are from the UK, the readership of the website exhibits greater diversity, with 50% of visitors coming from outside the UK.

The board of directors of Co-operative News comprises a range of 9 to 11 members. The majority of board seats are designated for representatives from member cooperative societies, while one director is elected by and from individual members. Presently, Co-operative News heavily relies on its major subscribers, primarily large retail co-operative societies, who possess the needed capital to fund the journal through their subscriptions. As a result, the financial independence of Co-operative News is informally influenced by these significant retail societies. Consequently, their main challenge lies in attracting and in effect representing smaller cooperatives, particularly worker cooperatives, and individual members.

One notable aspect that affects subscription rates is the absence of a paywall on the website. This deliberate decision is driven by political considerations, as it ensures complete accessibility and free access to the content. Thus, the challenge lies in finding effective ways to encourage people to subscribe to the magazine while preserving the principle of open and free content access.

Co-operative News relies on income generated from subscriptions and advertising. The management of advertising is entrusted to a partner advertising cooperative, which adheres to a filtering process to select only ethical advertisements. Additionally, cooperative societies also serve as advertisers within the publication.

Many media cooperatives face a common challenge related to monetizing online content. Generating substantial income from online stories proves difficult unless the platform reaches a vast readership of millions. Otherwise, the revenue generated from such sources tends to be negligible.

A consumer cooperative – workers as employees

Co-operative News operates as a consumer co-operative, which sets it apart from the multistakeholder format where employees are also members of the cooperative. In this consumer co-operative model, employees are recruited based on specific needs and requirements. The selection process involves interviews and evaluations conducted by the executive director and two members of the board of directors.

The internal operations of Co-operative News follow a relatively horizontal decision-making structure. According to Voinea, decisions are deliberated upon in daily Zoom meetings, with the team actively seeking mutual agreements and consensus. However, in instances where reaching a consensus proves challenging, the executive director has the authority to make the final decision.

The team at Co-op News consists of three full-time positions: Executive Editor, International Editor, and Digital Editor, along with two part-time roles: Staff Writer and Designer. The small size of the team presents additional challenges, as there is a high reliance on each employee within their respective positions. Moreover, covering tasks during sick leaves and vacation days can be difficult. This issue of understaffing and the resulting pressure on employees is a shared experience among many of the cooperatives interviewed. While cooperatives strive to provide just working conditions, this inherent contradiction between market needs, fair conditions, and the pursuit of sustainability and continuity is evident. However, it's important to note that this challenge is not unique to cooperative press models; it permeates the entire media sector. The difference lies in the active and ongoing discussion of justice and fair conditions among the members and employees of media cooperatives.

The Case Study of NB Media Co-op⁵⁷ – Don't Hate the Media, Be the Media

“The cooperative model felt like the democratic way to go in order to produce and disseminate our media”, Tracy Glinn, Founding Member and Coordinating Editor.

The concept of establishing the NB Media Co-op originated from a social forum held in 2008 in the province of New Brunswick, Canada. Social forums, which were popular political activities among left-wing activists at that time, were transitioning from centralized big events to more localized mobilization activities.

The social forum that took place in 2008 in New Brunswick, Canada was especially remarkable as it brought together over 200 individuals from diverse backgrounds, including workers, students, anti-capitalists, anti-imperialists, peace activists, Indigenous rights activists, feminists, gay rights activists, labor unionists, environmentalists, social workers and artists. In a rural province with a population of 750,000, the significant turnout of over 200 individuals indicated the potential for further collective mobilization.

The province of New Brunswick faces a unique media landscape, where a single major corporation wields control not only over the media but also over key industries, such as resource extraction, oil refineries, and mining. This creates a concerning conflict of interest, as the very corporation in need of scrutiny and investigation also owns the media outlets responsible for reporting on these industries, which are known to have increased labor issues.

It is within this context that the idea for the NB Media Co-op emerged. The concept gained traction during the social forum, where some participants had prior experience with a national media cooperative. Drawing from this experience, they proposed adopting a similar model for the NB Media Co-op. However, they deliberately chose to remain independent from the national co-op while fostering coordination with other cooperatives and alternative media outlets.

“Another New Brunswick and World are Possible.”⁵⁸

The co-op operates as an online publication known as “The NB Media Co-op”. Additionally, they publish a monthly broadsheet, “The Brief”, and produce a political talk show with CHCO-TV, named “NB Debrief”. Fourteen years since its inception, the publication remains deeply connected to the social movements that were involved in its creation and is dedicated to championing the causes they represent. Through a social justice lens, they cover stories which are often misrepresented or overlooked in local media. Their reporting includes perspectives from marginalized groups such as workers, students, Indigenous and racialized communities. A glance at their website showcases their editorial stance, with content divided into categories like New Brunswick, Canada, World, Environment, Indigenous, Labour, Gender, Politics,

⁵⁷The case study is based on the website and available official documents of NB Media Co-op, and an in-depth interview with Tracy Glinn, Founding Member and Coordinating Editor.

⁵⁸ “About | NB Media Co-Op,” NB Media Co-op, August 6, 2019, <https://nbmediacoop.org/about/>.

and Culture. Their editorial direction counters the province's "dominant culture of defeat"⁵⁹, where mainstream media often promotes the narrative of relying solely on fossil fuels, overshadowing grassroots efforts advocating for a different future. The co-op actively highlights collective efforts to challenge injustices, successfully offering an alternative discourse.

In smaller media organizations, it can be easy for a limited number of individuals to dominate, veering away from the vision of an inclusive, democratic platform. The aim of the NB Media Co-op is to promote diversity, encompassing both the well-resourced retirees and others who are less privileged. Ensuring varied perspectives is pivotal, especially given their dedication to representing marginalized groups. Their key organizers, rooted in diverse social movements from tenant rights to environmental advocacy, are transparent about their affiliations. Their website features a calendar showcasing social justice events. While they respond to requests to cover various events linked to the movements, their commitment extends to nurturing emerging writers and encouraging collaborative storytelling, thus fostering an environment where stories from all backgrounds are shared and valued. The cooperative has set processes for accountability and consensus building, for managing disagreements among the editorial board, and for formalizing the approval/disapproval process of submissions.

Founded by volunteers, the co-op's structure comprises a board of directors, an editorial board, and reader members. The board of directors oversees the co-op's operations, financial health, and adherence to its core principles. Content creation and editing fall under the editorial board's purview. Both boards are elected at their annual general meeting, with members following a "one person, one vote" policy. Their bylaws emphasize a non-hierarchical approach, focusing on role-based division of labor and consensus decision-making. Until 2022, the co-op operated solely with volunteers. Around 15 individuals form the core team, supported by approximately 60 volunteers involved in various tasks. The initial vision was member-sustainability, eventually leading to hiring journalists with fair wages. However, the challenges of balancing volunteer work with personal commitments meant stretched resources. Recently, thanks to government funding, they employed a full-time journalist and a part-time manager. Expenses primarily cover these salaries, website costs, and "The Brief" printing. Their revenue sources include a \$30 annual membership fee (with around 200 members), monthly donations, and union contributions. While some criticize their union affiliations, the co-op asserts transparency in their bias and sees their alignment with labor issues as a natural union partnership. They maintain the freedom to critique even the unions when necessary. Their website receives approximately 25,000 unique visitors monthly.

The NB Media Co-op's standout experience is its 13-year survival while relying fully on volunteers. This sustainability can be attributed to its members' political dedication and its deep ties to a larger regional social movement. Their journey underlines the importance of commitment to social justice and the co-op's political mission beyond a mere business venture. Presently, they grapple with challenges like integrating recruitment and employment without compromising their core values, sustaining growth while retaining editorial independence, and attracting fresh talent amid increasing provincial migration.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Interview with Tracy Glinn, Founding Member and Coordinating Editor.

From Indymedia to Cooperative Media

The late nineties Indymedia movement served as a source of inspiration for the establishment of "The Dominion" and, subsequently, the national media cooperative known as "Media.coop.ca" in Canada. The Dominion marked one of Canada's earliest endeavors to create media that focused on "grassroots news," amplifying the voices of directly affected individuals rather than prioritizing politicians and those in positions of power. Although initially oriented towards a democratic framework, the cooperative concept was introduced later in its development.

Media Co-op extended its influence through a network of city-specific websites, encompassing as many as six cities at its peak in 2020. These platforms were open for public contributions, with the editorial collective primarily intervening to highlight noteworthy posts. Concurrently, The Dominion, serving as an overarching cooperative newspaper, curated high-quality content from various sources and featured it on its main platform. For approximately 8-10 years, this collective effort relied on principles of open access, technology, and grassroots organizing to deliver news directly from the affected communities.

As the era of social media giants dawned, their extensive capabilities and reach gradually overshadowed the efforts of these cooperatives. Nevertheless, the experience continues to serve as a wellspring of inspiration for emerging media cooperatives in both Canada and North America.

Based on an interview with Dru Oja Jay, Co-founder of Media Co-op.

The Case Study of New Internationalist Magazine⁶¹ – More Than Just a News Organization

“Some people are really invested in the magazine; they’ve been reading it for decades. It was only natural to bring them a little bit closer”, Amy Hall, Co-Editor, New Internationalist Magazine.

In 2017, the New Internationalist Magazine initiated one of the largest community share offers, inviting its readers to become co-owners. By the end of the campaign, they had exceeded their target, raising 704,114 U.K. Pounds from 3,409 readers. Remarkably, 75% of the contributors donated between £50-£100, indicating the campaign's appeal to individuals with limited financial means. Today, New Internationalist operates as a multi-stakeholder cooperative, co-owned by 4,600 reader-owners and 11 employees. Confronted with a challenging economic situation, New Internationalist had to choose between seeking funds from investors or third parties and turning to their readers. They chose the latter.

New Internationalist stands as a testament to the continuous transformation and adaptability of media organizations. Founded in 1973 in Oxford, U.K., by a group of student activists, it initially gathered support from prominent U.K. NGOs such as Oxfam and Christian Aid. By 1987, the publication had undergone various evolutions, ultimately becoming an equal pay worker cooperative. They have gained recognition

⁶¹ The case study is based on the website and available official documents of New Internationalist Magazine, and an in-depth interview with Amy Hall, Co-Editor, New Internationalist Magazine.

for their in-depth coverage of stories and investigative reports pertaining to topics such as conflicts, migration, climate change, and democracy. Additionally, they prominently feature narratives from the Global South, authored by individuals coming from those regions. This distinctive approach allows them to present alternative narratives and highlight subjects that often remain marginalized within mainstream media narratives.

Its most recent transformation saw it transition into a multi-stakeholder cooperative. Within the overarching New Internationalist Cooperative, workers maintain their own subsidiary, the New Internationalist Publications, steadfastly upholding the equal pay policy. This model transition prompted a structural overhaul. At present, while readers wield greater influence in the co-op's broader operations, workers directly oversee day-to-day tasks. An annual general meeting is convened for all co-owners. Editorial intervention by reader co-owners is reserved solely for instances of breaches in the editorial charter. For instance, if content were to overtly support a political party or advocate for conservative politics, readers possess the collective authority to intercede. Furthermore, a "Common Council" exists for a subset of co-owners interested in deeper engagement. This council meets quarterly, offering detailed feedback on editorial choices and supporting the Annual General Meeting's proceedings. The notion of "community shareholders" suggests that members primarily invest in the cooperative without anticipating tangible financial returns. Instead, they are integrated into the publication's core community. These members receive newsletters, engage in general meetings, partake in decision-making, and enjoy unparalleled access to the editorial team – a degree of involvement seldom found in mainstream media.

Internally, the team is organized into distinct working groups, each centered around a specific area of expertise: Editorial, HR Personnel, Fundraising, and Business Strategy. Regular meetings convene every two weeks for the entire worker cooperative. During these gatherings, team members update each other and collectively address significant matters. Together, they determine the key stories to cover and engage in collective voting for significant decisions.

To streamline the decision-making process, the relevant working group formulates well-researched proposals concerning the current topic at hand. These proposals serve as the basis for informed voting. While consensus-building is the preferred approach, in instances of controversy, a formal vote takes place to reach a resolution.

Recently, the cooperative encountered a challenge involving the redundancy of two worker members. The collective group was tasked with deciding in this regard, and the concerned workers had to take themselves out of the equation. This scenario underscores one of the prominent challenges faced by worker co-ops. Specifically, when financial resources prove inadequate or shifts in job demands arise, addressing the need for personnel reductions or making choices with potential impacts on individuals' quality of life becomes a complex predicament.

Table 2: Models of Different media cooperatives

| Name | Location | Est. | Type | Content and focus | Funding model | Members |
|----------------|-------------|------|-------------------------|--|---|--|
| Taz | Germany | 1979 | Multi-stakeholder owner | Producing left-leaning media | Consumer and producer membership Subscriptions (80%) Ecological advertising (10%) Shop sales (10%) | 24,000 |
| Woz (Infolink) | Switzerland | 1981 | Worker-owned | Largest left-wing independent newspaper in Switzerland | Subscriptions (80%) Advertising space and donations (20%) | WOZ (Infolink): Over 50 ProWoz: 850 |
| The Ferret | Scotland | 2015 | Multi-stakeholder owned | Independent investigative journalism based on community priorities | Subscriptions (30%) Grants and collaborations (70%) | 2,000+ |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------|----------------|------|---|--|--|------------|
| Co-operative news | United Kingdom | 1871 | Consumer-owned - Individual Membership and Corporate Membership | Producing news about co-operatives in the UK and globally | Subscription-based membership Advertising (entrusted to advertising co-op) | N/a |
| NB Media Co-op | Canada | 2008 | Consumer-owned | Independent media model covering news about social movements and marginalized groups | Membership fees Monthly donations Union contributions | Around 200 |
| New Internationalist | United Kingdom | 1973 | Multi-stakeholder owned | Newspaper covering subjects not usually covered in mainstream media | Online shops + book publishing: 52% Subscriptions and newsstand: 73% Advertising and royalties: 11% Grants and donations 16% | 4,600+ |

Table 2

A Framework for Media Cooperatives – The foundations of independence, democratization, and a commitment to social justice

The case studies presented above clearly showcase the different models of currently operating media cooperatives. They also allow us to easily deduct general trends and similarities across all of them. Based on the literature, the case studies presented above, and a larger desk research of other available examples, the paper suggests a framework for media cooperatives that is rooted in three essential foundations: Independence, Democratization and Social Justice. It is evident that there is no one formula or a checklist that one can follow to create a sustainable and successful media cooperative. It is equally evident that successful models have intentionally and repeatedly made choices that protected their priorities and values on the one hand and ensured their sustainability on the other.



A Commitment to Independence

*“Without solving the issue of funding, we cannot speak of truly independent, democratic and just media”.*⁶²
Doja Daoud, Journalist and Member of the Alternative Media Syndicate Collective

Ownership

The question of financial independence, or in the simplest terms, *“Where does your money come from?”* is at the center of any discussion around media independence. Media cooperatives approach this issue differently. The first distinction comes from the type of cooperative they choose to adopt. As mentioned before, the prevailing types are reader/consumer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, or multi-stakeholder cooperatives. The cooperative type does not necessarily reflect their source of funding, but majorly affects the issue of ownership. The collective ownership model is seen as a direct response to capital monopoly over the ownership of mainstream media. The choice between reader ownership or worker ownership is affected by concerns over editorial independence. The choice of opening the ownership of a certain news outlet to its readers is particularly critical if not coupled with clear guidelines on how to maintain editorial independence. Taz, for example, adopts a multi-stakeholder ownership model. The cooperative is divided into two bodies of membership where the reader members have privileges pertaining to voting on financial and major organizational decisions, whereas the workers members control editorial decisions. The Ferret has a highly similar ownership model. In contrast, Woz is exclusively owned by the journalists working in it but actively maintains a strong relationship with its readers. Co-op News is slightly different as it has corporate members and individual members. The issue of ownership is linked to the issue of power – does a single person or entity possess enough power to dictate what and how media organizations tell their stories? The fundamental answer to this issue is the ‘one person, one vote’ policy. This principle that is inherent to cooperatives worldwide is designed by nature to limit the ability of one particular party whether a person or a group to decide for the larger community that a cooperative serves. In that sense, no matter how much a person invests in a co-op, their vote is equal to all other members. The principle by itself does not protect the organization from the informal ability of exerting greater influence due to financial means; however, it manages to add a layer of protection. The Co-op News for example faces a challenge in reaching out to smaller cooperative societies to diversify their membership base and in effect limit the power large retail co-ops have over the organization. Although expressed through different types of ownership, what the successful cooperative models have in common is collective ownership of the co-op.

Funding

In addition to ownership, a defining characteristic of media cooperatives is their sources of funding. These two pillars are undeniably the most critical foundational elements when it comes to defining media cooperatives. Woz and Taz and Co-op News are almost exclusively funded by their readers. They also rely, in small percentages, on ads (Taz and Woz: 10%), selling merchandise (Taz 10%) and donations (Woz 10%).

⁶² Quote from an interview with Doja Daoud, Journalist and Member of the Alternative Media Syndicate Collective.

This complete accountability to readers and subscriptions results in a relationship that is almost entirely based on trust. The readers pay the news organization, and they trust that they're getting their investment back in terms of content. In the case of Woz and Taz, subscriptions are different from memberships. A reader can subscribe to the Taz without becoming a member and membership fee is paid once and for all. In the case of co-op news, subscription directly equates membership and is renewable.

The Ferret, on the other hand, only secures 30% of its funding through subscriptions. The other 70% comes from donors and partnerships. This example also demonstrates that the approach to independence does not necessarily need to be reduced to an all or nothing strategy. It is rather an invitation to put the issue on the table and attempt to solve it. The Ferret is attempting to secure from their readers enough money to cover the salaries of employees and the donor money goes for other expenses. They believe that when their livelihood is not reliant on external sources of funding, their ability to resist any editorial interference is stronger. NB media presents another interesting example. They get part of their funding from workers unions. The rootedness of many media cooperatives in larger social movements is common and will be further discussed under the social justice foundation. However, when it comes to financial reliance on organized bodies in certain movements, the issue becomes controversial. NB media considers that their transparency on their funding and natural political positioning in relationship to workers unions explains this financial relationship. However, this point is still actively employed to question their independence and their ability to critically cover possible failures or mistakes of the unions themselves. The cases have illustrated that media cooperatives can rely on various possible forms of funding while still maintaining a high level of independence.

Editorial freedom

This leads us to the last point: independence for media cooperatives is linked to complete editorial control and freedom from any powerful hold on them. However, it does not indicate political neutrality. They are mostly unapologetically positioned politically and aligned with a multitude of political causes. They perceive their independence in relationship to the "powerful" in their societies. The powerful can be capital, big industries, politicians, political parties, the police and so on. In that sense, their independence is linked to the inability of the powerful to affect their coverage.

Striving for Democratization

"The ideal model calls for greater independence from political considerations and a structure that is more horizontal than hierarchical".⁶³ - Salman Andary, Journalist

The relationship between democracy and media is often oversimplified, with a common notion suggesting that increasing the diversity of media institutions automatically leads to a healthier democracy. It's a straightforward enough equation: more media equals a better democratic society. However, this perspective has long been challenged by critical literature that delves into issues such as media ownership,

⁶³ Quote from an Interview with Salman Andary, Journalist.

advertising, indirect and informal political influence, and various other factors that can significantly impact the interplay between media and democracy.

When we delve into the concept of media democratization, cooperatives take the discussion to an entirely different level. At its core, a cooperative represents a profoundly democratic form of organization.⁶⁴ For media/news cooperatives, democratization unfolds across three key dimensions: organizational structure, the relationship with readers and the community, and editorial decision-making.

Organization

In terms of formal organizational structure, the first layer of democratic practice involves the election of a board of directors by the cooperative's members, who hold these directors accountable. Whether these members are readers, workers, or corporate entities, they have a direct say in the cooperative's operations, particularly concerning major decisions related to finances, recruitment, values, principles, and partnerships. However, this structure alone does not guarantee democratic operation, especially since most media co-ops typically convene general assemblies only once a year.

The second layer of democratization relates to internal functioning and day-to-day operations. Regardless of the type of cooperative, consensus-building is a fundamental process for making internal decisions. The practicality of implementing consensus-building varies from one organization to another, depending on the team's size and specific cooperative model. For instance, NB Media Co-op, which is owned by its reader members, conducts votes for both the editorial board and the board of directors during the Annual General Meeting. Furthermore, the editorial board operates within a horizontal structure outlined in the bylaws. In practice, they do have specific roles and responsibilities that impose a certain division of labor, including having an editor; however, their power comes from a consensual delegation from the team. Each member in their position is committed to fulfill their responsibility in accordance with the groups' decision.

On the other hand, Woz follows a more intricate structure as a worker's co-op, inherently assuming democratic and equal power for all workers in organizational management. The "Plenum," comprising every employee working two days or more per week, assumes responsibility for all strategic decisions. The Plenum also votes for smaller specialized committees tasked with day-to-day operations. The editorial board at Woz consists of three editors, with the power to comment on, edit, and collaborate on content with writers. However, they lack the authority to reject publication. This structure functions effectively when cooperative members are aligned with the organization's broader mission.

Commitment to cooperative values, democratic ownership, solidarity, and progressive working conditions is essential. Respect for processes of mutual learning and collective responsibility plays a crucial role in fostering an environment conducive to continuous decision-making through consensus building. This isn't to say that conflicts never arise or disagreements are never reached, but cooperative principles help

⁶⁴ Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, "Media Cooperatives: Challenges and Opportunities," Medium, February 8, 2019, <https://medium.com/@jgksfconsulting/media-cooperatives-challenges-and-opportunities-e6803c0716ae>.

navigate and resolve such issues. To mitigate these issues, New Internationalist introduced internal voting. Decision making is reached through consensus-building for the most part, but they do resort to voting to properly reflect the positions of the team members on specific issues.

In a cooperative as large as Taz, the situation is different. Taz introduced a degree of hierarchy in terms of having a chief editor, CEO and people managing different parts and units. Gellenbeck describes it as a “balance between work hierarchies and what workers can contribute in decision-making”.⁶⁵ This undoubtedly implicates some concentration of power at the hands of individuals. However, this is checked by the employee assembly. Employees elect 3 out of 5 members of the board of directors and vote for the chief editor; they can also veto major decisions taken by the board of directors and supervisory board. The task of preserving democratic decision making becomes more complicated as the organization grows.

The commitment to democratization should be tightly linked to the self-definition of media co-ops and it should be reflected in their internal documents and values. The balance between efficiency and consensus building is political by nature. It is only possible when the commitment to the values of the cooperative and the common purpose is clear and shared. Additionally, the success of internal democratic decision-making is conditional to the genuine adoption of the three foundations hereby discussed. The absence of just working conditions for example, undermines the validity of the common purpose thus disturbing people’s commitment to democratic organizing. In that sense, an intricate balance is crucial and necessary to the sustainability media co-ops.

Relationship with readers

The second dimension of media democratization is linked to the media co-ops’ relationship with the reader. Consumer-owned media co-ops are by default inviting the reader to become part of decision-making. As mentioned above, they create a delicate balance between inviting readers to become more involved while retaining editorial independence. The relationship of media co-ops with their communities is reflective of their perception of their role as media. They see themselves as serving the interests of a certain community and raising the voices of those unheard. In that sense, the invitation to participate in decision making stems from the pretext that a feedback loop is needed between the community and their media.

This relationship is not limited to reader-owned cooperatives. Worker cooperatives also have their own ways to reach out to their readers but in matters that are not formalized like the ownership model. Additionally, media cooperatives in general rely on subscriptions as they are all critical of advertising and refuse big capital investments. Large number of subscriptions also demand an active relationship with the readers. Cooperatives acknowledge that if they are asking people to invest in their work, they have to cede some of their powers to them. Offering the content alone is not enough; a sustained relationship with the readers results from a sense of real ownership and engagement. Woz, for example, is a worker cooperative that gets 80% of its funding from its readers. They say that they are built around the solidarity between them and the community. They established the ProWoz foundation that is open for ownership

⁶⁵ Interview with Konny Gellenbeck, Co-founder of Taz Newspaper and Head of the Taz Panter Stiftung.

by the readers. This foundation is responsible for accepting any type of external funding for the Woz. In effect, they involved their readers in order to add a layer of accountability and transparency.

Media coops acknowledge that maintaining an active communication with their readers is challenging. It demands resources and usually their teams are understaffed. In addition to participation in the Annual General Meetings, ways to involve the readers are varied. Examples of this include The Ferret, which occasionally performs polls to decide on which investigations to carry. The NB Media Coop is also open for community submissions, and they engage in training citizen journalists.

Editorial decision-making

The final dimension of democratization is the actual content. This commitment to democratic economic organizing ought to be reflected in its content. This is not to say that cooperatives must support democracy in its liberal definition. It is rather a commitment to stand against tyrannies, autocratic regimes and to always reflect the interest of the people and their voice. This dimension is also reflected in the third foundation concerning social justice.

A Stand for Social Justice

The entire suggested model of media cooperatives, with its three foundational principles, is firmly rooted in a resolute commitment to social justice. The decision to remain independent and democratic is not made within a political vacuum and is not driven solely by a business strategy for achieving success. Instead, it represents a 'formula' that has been innovated and adapted by various media organizations and social movements over the years to establish public service media devoted to social justice issues. This is clearly demonstrated through the narratives of the majority of media cooperatives interviewed in this research and beyond. Entities such as Taz, Woz, NB Media Coop, the New Internationalist, and Coop News all emerged from social movements and political mobilization events, each within their respective contexts. In contrast, The Ferret, specializing in investigative journalism, maintained a distance from political rivalries in Scotland, believing that the community was highly polarized and that there was a need for a platform to hold power accountable while maintaining impartiality.

Editorial guidelines

The commitment to social justice is prominently emphasized in their editorial guidelines, the topics they cover, restrictions on advertising to ethical brands, and their strong ties to grassroots movements. Another common feature is their determination to avoid aligning the cooperative with a specific political party, instead supporting causes and people. In this sense, their allegiance lies with the causes and individuals rather than formalized organizations and groups. Some of the causes supported by the interviewed media news cooperatives include workers' rights, student movements, anti-imperialism, peace movements, feminism, labor organizing, climate change and environmentalism, and LGBTQ+ rights.

Fair working conditions

Devotion to social justice is fundamentally a political practice that organizations must adopt within their own structures. In the case of media organizations, they cannot advocate for social justice while maintaining exploitative working conditions. This is clearly evident in the case studies examined in this research. Woz, New Internationalist, and The Ferret all adhere to equal pay structures, while Taz employs a scale that ensures minimal pay discrepancies among its employees. NB Media Co-op, however, is an exception, as they have only recently begun their recruitment efforts. In addition to pay equality, there are considerations related to the value of wages. In most cases, media cooperatives aim to align journalist salaries with the national average or calculate them based on the cost of living. Some policies even include special benefits for individuals responsible for supporting dependents, such as children and the elderly. However, a common challenge voiced by many is that the existing financial model often hinders their ability to compete effectively in terms of market value, prevent high turnover, and provide a decent quality of life for their employees. This challenge poses a significant threat to the cooperative model and its underlying principles.

The increasing economic pressures on the working class, compounded by global inflation and the ramifications of the war in Ukraine, jeopardize the ability of communities to sustain their support for media cooperatives. This, in turn, directly affects the financial resources available to these cooperatives and, consequently, the livelihoods of their workers. Sustaining a cooperative that challenges the very foundations of the capitalist and market-driven economy remains an ongoing challenge. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the cooperative model, with all its innovations and problem-solving approaches, continues to address issues that mainstream media struggles to tackle. This underscores the need for greater cooperation and communication among existing cooperative models and media activists. The majority of interviewees expressed a desire for increased collaboration and mutual support. Currently, most media cooperatives are part of independent or alternative media alliances in their respective countries and regions. They also participate in larger cooperative associations. However, when it comes to intercommunication and shared learning among media cooperatives, these efforts remain limited. In some cases, media cooperatives operating in the same country lack open channels of communication.

The Potentiality of the Media Cooperative Model in the Case of Lebanon: Challenges and opportunities

In this section, the potentiality of the media cooperative model as a model for the alternative media sector in Lebanon will be explored in reference to the above framework. In particular, the following dimensions will be discussed in terms of challenges and opportunities facing the move towards a cooperative model for alternative media outlets and publications: potential financial models, pathways towards democratization in the internal structures of alternative media organizations, and current legal barriers

and opportunities for establishing media cooperatives in Lebanon. This section will also reflect on further challenges, as well as ways forward.

A new financial model

In an editorial published by The Public Source⁶⁶, Lara Bitar, founding editor, raises questions pertaining to the funding of alternative journalism in Lebanon:

“How to remain principled, yet insure the viability of this publication?

How to secure fair living wages and working conditions for my colleagues while avoiding the patronage of establishment political parties and business interests?

How to continue to produce quality local public interest journalism - that is costly and labor intensive without sponsored content, ads, clickbaits, or paywalls?”⁶⁷

These questions eloquently summarize the funding dilemma of alternative media in Lebanon. Similar to most established alternative media platforms, The Public Source is funded by various donor organizations. Bitar argued that “in the absence of public funding, our resistance to corporate sponsorship, and our selective fundraising process, we are left with few means to pursue the public interest journalism we are devoted to”. In that sense, she acknowledges the co-optation risk of NGO funding of journalism, however, mentions steps taken by the team to prevent such effects including refusing any editorial intervention and refusing association to specific donor organizations. The article concludes with a call for the public to support The Public Source through monthly contributions. A “coming soon” Patreon⁶⁸ campaign has been launched offering attendance at their next editorial meeting and a say in upcoming investigations for a contribution of \$20 per month⁶⁹.

In parallel, Raseef22⁷⁰ launched recently a community platform “Nas Raseef”. For 2.22\$ a month, readers get to have ads-free articles, exclusive web privileges and content and most importantly an ability to directly communicate with the website’s editors⁷¹. Megaphone⁷² also launched a fundraising campaign limited to donations. Individual media accounts and podcasts, like Reflections with Jad Ghosn, Sarde and Haki Nassawi, also rely on individual Patreon donations to sustain their channels⁷³. The primary source of funding for alternative platforms, with a recorded exception of Rehla⁷⁴ and Akhbar el Seha⁷⁵, remains International Donor Organizations. This highlights the importance of initiating a local discussion around

⁶⁶ The Public Source is a Beirut-based alternative media organization. It is dedicated to reporting on socio economic issues and environmental crises through in depth critical journalism. Check: <https://thepublicsource.org>.

⁶⁷ Lara Bitar, “Let’s Talk about Funding Journalism,” thepublicsource.org, March 22, 2022, <https://thepublicsource.org/funding-journalism>.

⁶⁸ Patreon is a website with a “subscription style” payment model. It allows individuals and organizations mainly involved in intellectual and artistic creation to set up pages for fans/followers to financially support them.

⁶⁹ Check: <https://www.patreon.com/ThePublicSource>

⁷⁰ Raseef22 is a pan Arab alternative media digital media. It focuses on reporting stories of underrepresented communities such as women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQ+ and young people. Check: <https://raseef22.net>

⁷¹ Check: <https://raseef22.net/NasRaseef>

⁷² Megaphone is an alternative media platform based in Lebanon that produces explainer multimedia content covering local news. Check: <https://megaphone.news>

⁷³ Individual accounts are helpful examples, they however do not fall into the category of organized media platforms to be considered in this research. It is still important to further study them especially that as they grow, they are recruiting talents and workers and hence becoming employers in the form of individual platforms.

⁷⁴ Rehla is a Monthly Cultural Magazine focusing on critical stories, essays and research at the intersection of philosophy, politics, arts, culture and psychology. Check: <https://www.rehlamag.com>.

⁷⁵ Akhbar el Seha is An alternative media page the covers current demonstrations and sit-ins in various parts of Lebanon. It functions anonymously. Check: <https://www.facebook.com/akhbaralsaha>.

financial sustainability and independence. As some of them grow into established institutions, there are growing expectations to also demand higher levels of transparency and accountability. Doja Daoud, Journalist and Member of the Alternative Media Syndicate Collective, comments that “there is no transparency regarding how funding is divided, not with the public and especially not with employees”. Daoud adds that if we are looking at independence in its full sense, there are no independent organizations today in Lebanon. She defines independence as “not needing anyone, except your audience. It means that you cover whatever you want, however you want, and whenever you want”⁷⁶.

An indirect yet still relevant fear is linked to the boom in the number of online platforms, websites and Facebook pages, all claiming to be alternative media. A change in the media environment surrounding alternative media is clear. As a result, Salman Andary, Journalist, fears that “alternative media is starting to look similar to mainstream media”.⁷⁷ The lines between what is alternative and what is mainstream are starting to get blurred especially with the capacity of big investors and wealthy politicians to penetrate the digital space that was previously the haven for alternative media. “Most of the pages that came out from the streets, the attacks, the arrests, tear gas, and the explosion have now isolated themselves from the people and were transformed to personal political projects serving specific agendas”, Andary comments. With growing scrutiny comes bigger responsibilities. As a result, the coming phase necessitates that platforms stand out in their models. That they are forward with their audience, engaging and transparent. Only this can protect those genuinely aiming at creating a new form of media that is committed to public service journalism and is engaged in the fight against the political establishment in Lebanon.

Democratization of internal organization

Calls for public support are tightly linked to the potential of public engagement. Raseef and The Public Source already started including reader benefits to support claims. This is evidently a step towards greater democratization re-reader engagement. Further research is needed to examine the perception of currently established alternative media on reader ownership. Also, data lacks on the decision-making processes of these media today. While Daraj⁷⁸ and Raseef²² follow traditional management styles with clear responsibilities and roles, others express interest in attempting more democratic styles. Megaphone and Public Source attempt more horizontal structures while maintaining clear responsibilities and division of roles.⁷⁹ Rehla functions as a collective of writers, however, according to Haramoun Hamieh, editor in chief, the work ends up being more concentrated with one or two people.⁸⁰ Rehla in its structure, political leanings, and format is the closest to a potential cooperative. However, when asked about the barriers standing in front of its transformation to an official media co-op, Haramoun links it to a general lack of enthusiasm, socio-economic burdens on writers and general burn out.⁸¹ It is important to note that some

⁷⁶ Interview with Doja Daoud, Journalist and Member of the Alternative Media Syndicate Collective.

⁷⁷ Interview with Salman Andary, Journalist.

⁷⁸ Daraj alternative digital media platform created by experienced journalists. Their goal is to offer Arabic speakers an alternative kind of journalism, free from political funding and influence. Check: <https://daraj.media>.

⁷⁹ Diala Ahwach, “The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising” (Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Interview with Haramoun Hamieh, Editor In Chief of Rehla.

⁸¹ Interview with Haramoun Hamieh, Editor In Chief of Rehla.

contest the public claims of horizontal structures of some alternative media. Informal power structures are said to be present, and it has been argued that major decisions remain at the hand of the founders and tight groups.⁸² These claims and counterclaims are not the subject of our current research, and we acknowledge a lack of data to fully grasp the institutional culture of current alternative media. There is also a lack of data related to working conditions in alternative media institutions. Daraj in 2021 had 18 full-timers and collaborated with 184 freelancers.⁸³ Megaphone employed 15 full timers also with a large pool of freelancers. This officially positions current alternative media as employers.⁸⁴ Consequently, the extent of their commitment to just working conditions needs to be studied. In terms of content and editorial lines, alternative media today is clearly leading on a multitude of battles such as personal and media freedoms, corruption, LGBTQ+ rights, and the investigation in the August 4th explosion.

Finally, the research does not suggest that cooperatives are the “right” structure for any media institution and that their success should be measured relatively to that. It is rather suggesting possible approaches to media activists already interested in democratic organizing of media. It is also suggesting that democratic media that is committed to social justice ought to adopt a holistic approach and that through this approach the suggested model has a chance to succeed and present an innovative solution to a multiplicity of rising media issues.

Legal barriers and opportunities

Adopting the cooperative model as it is for the media in Lebanon is by itself a challenge. The legal environment for cooperatives to this date limits its grasp of cooperatives to those offering a tangible consumer product that has direct economic benefit to a certain group.⁸⁵ Farouk Moughraby believes that there might be some legal entry points that could solve the issues.⁸⁶ A further legal study is needed to examine the possibility of registering media coops and suggest possible amendments to law if the political environment allows it. However, learning from what the model has to offer does not need to be limited to the full “legal” adoption of the model. Alternative media today is registered under different legal statuses, some are registered as private companies, others as civil not for profit companies or as a non-governmental organization (NGO). In the context of an absent and dysfunctional state whose institutions are completely employed by an oppressive political elite, a recognition from this state is not seen as a prerequisite. What the co-op model suggests is mostly a form of self-organizing. The legal collective ownership part is indeed important, it however rarely involves return on investment and profit. It is an umbrella to legitimize collective decision making, just working conditions and real engagement with the readers. All of these can be adopted by media organizations in Lebanon regardless of their official legal status.

Further considerations, challenges and ways forward

⁸² This is based on talks with employees and freelancers that have been associated with some of these outlets. Names are not mentioned for the sake of preserving their identities.

⁸³ Diala Ahwach, “The Struggle over Narrative in Lebanon Post the October Uprising” (Lebanon: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021), <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/beirut/18771.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Interview with Jamal Osta, Lebanese General Directorate of Cooperatives.

⁸⁶ Interview with Farouk Moghrabi, Lawyer and Legal Representative of the Alternative Media Syndicate Collective.

Another major challenge is the ability of the community to support potential co-ops financially. At the moment, crowdfunding campaigns are predominantly targeting the Lebanese diaspora. Also, further discussions should tackle these issues. Are media cooperatives capable of gathering support around them? Successful models outside of Lebanon have heavily relied on their tight relationships with grassroots movements. The community was already formed which resulted in the formation of its media. In Lebanon, the opposition sphere is as fragmented as ever. Collective burnout and political apathy are at an all-time high. How can people interested in this model navigate this political reality?

Conclusion

The aim of this research is not to definitively determine whether the cooperative model can serve as a viable model of alternative media in Lebanon. Instead, its primary objective is to introduce a novel perspective to the political imagination of media activists in Lebanon, one that offers innovative approaches to addressing issues of media independence, democratization, and a steadfast commitment to social justice.

This research goes beyond theory by offering practical examples and in-depth demonstrations of successful models that have triumphed over numerous seemingly insurmountable challenges. While recognizing the scarcity of media cooperatives in the Global South, this study suggests utilizing the case study as a source of inspiration that can be tailored to local contexts.

Furthermore, this research also targets consumers of alternative media. It provides them with tangible examples of structural commitments that can be adopted by the media outlets they follow, particularly those outlets that publicly advocate for independence, democratization, and the promotion of social justice.

In an era of ever-evolving political landscapes, this paper prefigures a future moment in Lebanon where democratic political, social, and economic organizing will regain momentum. It envisions that this research will serve as a humble contribution, supporting the establishment of a new media that is rooted in future social movements and characterized by honesty and authenticity in its format, content, and organizational model.

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