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The role of media festivals in strengthening independent media

Media Festival Briefing

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IMS

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Foreword

International Media Support (IMS) rejects "single axis" frameworks of how to support independent media and rather favours a holistic understanding of how a variety of change agents and ingredients of change must combine to drive media development. We strive for a more comprehensive understanding of the viability of public interest media and content production that better reflect the root causes of inequality and disparities in modern digital renegotiated worlds. In so doing, we seek out emerging trends which play some part in the push back against interlocking and mutually constitutive modes of power and oppression.

An area of much interest is shifting support relationships and structures for independent media, and the new mechanics of knowledge exchange that can play into the modality of emerging and alternative funding or economic models for independent media. We have long championed approaches to strengthening independent media which do not happen in isolation: we have worked extensively to support network building, encouraged collaborations and partnerships, and coalition building. We shared lessons learned, for example, with stakeholders benefiting from the PRIMED programme on coalitions for change, and more generally with the wider media development community to develop "enhanced strong and inclusive coalitions that defend and support the space for media freedom and viability in different contexts". We have also encouraged the principles of broader participation in international events and seek to support more equal and contextual exchange of experiences for greatest impact.

In this briefing, we explore the role of media festivals in the resilience of local regional and global digital native ecosystems. Media festivals have emerged from the grassroots with a renewed energy to strengthen media in their local ecosystems and offer contextual relevance to localised challenges. This brief report is a discussion paper focused on emerging trends and patterns in Global South journalism and media innovation events, that has as its objective to offer an initial review of this emerging methodology in local contexts.

The report has been authored by independent consultant Sameer Padania, who was an active participant in all four festivals featured, as part of a consultancy project for International Media Support, funded by the Ford Foundation. He was a judge for a pitch session and ran one workshop at Media Party, gave three clinics and one workshop at Splice Beta, co-ran one workshop and co-moderated a donors' meeting at the Africa Media Festival, and spoke on a panel at Festival 3i. The report also draws on inputs from International Media Support programme managers and partners.

IMS is grateful to all the organising teams and partners participating in all four festivals for their hospitality, insights and cooperation.

Dr Clare Cook
Head of Journalism and Media Viability, International Media Support

Introduction

In-person conferences are an important part of the sensory system of the independent journalism sector, of how it shares and processes its common threats and opportunities, introduces new voices and ideas, strengthens existing connections, and makes new ones, within and across borders. The independent media sector relies so much on trust, on relationships, and on personality, that such in-person events, and the side conversations, serendipity and soft links they entail, are a crucial way to strengthen.

Such events have taken place around the world for many years, in different parts of the journalism sector – including commercial media, public service media, innovation, press freedom, investigative journalism, media and democracy, visual documentary, podcasting, and storytelling.

"I used to go to those conferences, the large ones in windowless hotel conference rooms. The ones where people pay $1,500 to go and listen to white men on panels talking about Their Awesome Newsrooms. Everyone claps because they think that's what a newsroom transformed sounds like, but none of them can take this stuff home and do it because it's not practical, not teachable, and not actionable. Splice Beta is designed to be the complete opposite."
Alan Soon, Co-founder, Splice Beta media festival

But in recent years, journalism-focused events markedly different from more traditional, hierarchical industry conferences, in approach, style and purpose have emerged or grown across the world, in response to dynamics, needs and opportunities in their respective local, national or regional media ecosystems. The most internationally prominent is the International Journalism Festival (IJF) in Perugia, Italy (est 2006), but a wider range is noted in Section 5 of this report.

Festivals – common in the world of arts, culture, heritage and tourism – are a relatively recent phenomenon in the journalism world. Their openness, informality, and intentionally celebratory nature strikes a contrast with more formal, hierarchical and authoritative forms of event, and in doing so, opens up new pathways and possibilities for the independent media field.

That field has also diversified significantly, partly enabled by digitisation, and by public interest-oriented funding from various donors, investors and entrepreneurs. There has been a Cambrian explosion in many parts of the world of new kinds of especially digital-native organisations blending journalism, data, civic information, and entertainment (see, for example, SembraMedia's Inflection Point International study, on digital-native media in 12 countries worldwide).

As part of this, events focused on journalism, and held or designed in the Global North, have gradually broadened their programmes and speaker lists to a more global range. Compare, for example, the IJF's 2016 roster of speakers to the much more globally diverse 2023 edition.

Such festivals are also taking place across the Global South, and are attracting increasingly global attendees. This brief discussion paper looks at four diverse examples of such festivals – Media Party in Argentina, Festival 3i in Brazil, Splice Beta in Thailand, and the Africa Media Festival in Kenya - and seeks to develop preliminary hypotheses about the nature of these events, what distinguishes them from other events in the independent media ecosystem, what they hope to achieve, and how they are evolving.

It also seeks to discern patterns or learnings emerging from these festivals that suggest practical recommendations for those running, setting up or supporting such events in the future, and includes concrete examples of practices that other practitioners can learn or adapt from.

1.   An Overview of Four Festivals

Media Party

Photo by www.instagram.com/hackshackersba

[Media Party](), Buenos Aires, Argentina

How does Media Party describe itself?
- "Media Party is the most important media innovation conference in Latin America. Over three days, representatives from major global companies, regional media and journalists, and entrepreneurs and software developers from local communities meet and work together for the future of the media."

Who founded and organises Media Party?
- Founded in 2012 by Mariano Blejman of the Buenos Aires chapter of the Hacks/Hackers network (founded in 2011), Media Party now has a part-time team of 8. The event is staffed largely by volunteers, including students, through a partnership with local university UADE.

What is the format of Media Party?
- It is structured over three days - progressing from learning, to doing, through Keynotes and Lightning Talks (rapid presentations), Workshops, a Media Fair, and a Hackathon at which participants prototype and build pieces of technology.

Where does Media Party take place?
- The Latin America edition takes place at a former industrial space, the Ciudad Cultural Konex, in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- In June 2023, it held an edition in Chicago, USA, and the team is exploring whether to pilot an edition of Media Party in another region of the world.

What is its mission/purpose?
- "Media Party facilitates the intersection between the media and technology industry in an innovative, international and "hands-on" way."

How is Media Party financed/funded/sponsored?
- Media Party fundraises to philanthropic foundations such as the Knight Foundation, tech funders like the Google News Initiative, intermediaries like ICFJ, innovation labs such as Knight Lab, businesses and tech companies, and receives sponsorship from companies like Newspack.

What is the budget for Media Party?
-   US$80,000-100,000 ("though if everyone were paid, it would be nearer $150,000").

Who is Media Party aimed at, and who attends?
-   The festival is aimed at Latin American media entrepreneurs and startups, tech developers, media peers from other parts of the world, and the ecosystem that supports them, including intermediaries and donors. They are intentionally looking for stronger connections with Asia, Africa, MENA. The event brings together over 2000 attendees/participants, predominantly from Latin America, but increasingly international.
-   Media Party directly inspired Code for Africa and Hacks/Hackers Africa to hold Media Indaba in 2017, but it failed to take root and held no further editions.

How is the programme for Media Party developed?
-   The team publishes an open call for submissions, from which they identify promising or interesting topics and speakers. They then build the Keynotes, Lightning Talks and Workshops over time, and add a track called 'Serendipity'. YouTube videos of talks are posted after the event.

Splice Beta

Photo by https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dm32r-Rs34Y

Splice Beta, Chiang Mai, Thailand

How does Splice Beta describe itself?
-   "An inclusive and diverse media startup festival in the northern Thai city of Chiang Mai. Beta is the only event in Asia that brings together the media ecosystem."

Who founded and organises Splice Beta?
-   Splice Beta was founded and organised by Alan Soon and Rishad Patel of Singapore-based Splice Media, an Asia-focused consulting firm focused on supporting viable media startups. They have a team of freelance and volunteer staff that support the event, including students from the university campus where the event takes place.

What is the format for Splice Beta?
-   Attendance is curated and capped at 200-250 to encourage deeper interaction and connection over the two days of event - one venue, communal eating space, coffee space + possibility of add-on or side-events. The focus is on providing practical advice, links, workshops, and that every attendee has something of value to contribute to others.

Where does Splice Beta take place?
- Splice Beta takes place in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand, at the Communications Department of Chiang Mai University. Chiang Mai is not far from the Myanmar border, and has a growing community of Myanmar media and civil society in exile. Splice Beta has held three editions, in-person in 2019, online in 2020, and in-person in 2022. A fourth edition will be held in November 2023.

What is Splice Beta's mission/purpose?
- "to help you build a viable media business"

How is Splice Beta financed/funded/sponsored?
- Splice Beta is funded and sponsored by Google, IFPIM, IMS, KAS, Luminate, MDIF, Meta, and Telum Media.

What is the budget for Splice Beta?
- US$160,000

Who is Splice Beta aimed at, and who attends?
- People from across the Splice community and beyond register their interest in attending, and the Splice team use a variety of manual and (from 2023) algorithmic techniques to build a diverse but coherent group of 200-250 people.

How is the Splice Beta programme developed?
- The Splice Media team take wide input from their community (on Telegram, Slack and elsewhere), partners, funders and sponsors on ideas of what matters, but what guides the Splice team to decide the final programme is what is most relevant and useful for the Splice community. Presentations and other resources useful to the Splice community are shared publicly afterwards.

Africa Media Festival

Photo by africamediafestival.com/2023-photos/

[Africa Media Festival,]() Nairobi, Kenya

How does the Africa Media Festival describe itself?
- "With programming focused on innovation, new-media practices, and business models, Africa Media Festival provided a platform for sharing knowledge and expertise on how to deliver content that can be consumed anywhere in Africa."

Who founded and organises the Africa Media Festival?
The Africa Media Festival was founded by the team at Baraza Media Lab, an innovation lab based in Nairobi,

Kenya, that also works on the East African and continental level.
Where does the Africa Media Festival take place?
- The inaugural edition of AMF was held in February 2023 at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Upperhill, Nairobi, Kenya.

What is the format of the Africa Media Festival?
- The first edition was a mix between a plenary conference with panels, keynotes, and lightning talks, and unconference-like workshops, an art exhibition and a mobile library, podcasting hackathons and townhall sessions (somewhat like workshops). Communal lunch and coffee breaks allowed for further networking. A small media fair (with various exhibitors from the local media ecosystem) took place on the venue rooftop, along with a book reading by prominent investigative journalist John Allan Namu. There was a pre-conference study tour of Nairobi-based media and creative sector, and post-conference private meetings, including a media funders forum.

What is the Africa Media Festival's mission/purpose?
- "Re-imagine Media" and "to celebrate the power and diversity of African storytelling".

How is the Africa Media Festival financed/funded/sponsored?
- Partners (funders) included Ford, Luminate, Mozilla.
- General partners included: The Continent, The Conversation Africa, Nation Media Group, and PRX.
- Sponsors included a range of local and international businesses.

What is the budget of AMF?
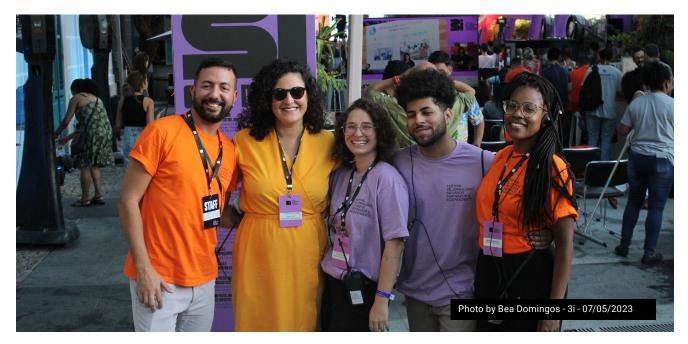- US$177,000, of which sponsors provided half.

Who is the Africa Media Festival aimed at, and who attends?
- As a relatively novel event type in Kenya, the target audience in the first instance was media professionals and practitioners, and those that support and fund them.
- The AMF brought together 600+ attendees, from across 18 African countries (primarily from Kenya and Eastern Africa), and a few international participants.

How is the Africa Media Festival's programme developed?
- The first edition of the festival was programmed largely by Baraza's lead curator, Christine Mungai, and its director, Maurice Otieno, with contributions and suggestions from partners, sponsors and funders. With longer lead times, the second edition in 2024 will have a different way of developing the programme, to be announced in due course.

Festival 3i

Photo by Bea Domingos - 3i - 07/05/2023

Festival 3i, Rio de Janeiro and other locations, Brazil

How does Festival 3i describe itself?

- "Festival 3i of Innovative, Inspiring and Independent Journalism is the first festival on the continent dedicated especially to innovation and entrepreneurship, key questions for the new generation of digital journalism."

Who founded and organises Festival 3i?

- F Festival 3i was founded by a group of 13 independent digital media in Brazil in 2017. Since 2022, it has been run by Ajor, the association for independent digital media created by 30 organisations, including the 13 digital media that founded the Festival. Festival production in 2023 was run by local event production company Cardapio de Ideas, but Ajor was responsible for the curation of the event's programme.

What format does Festival 3i take?

- Over 3 days, 3i programmes a series of panels (mostly involving Brazilian media and ecosystem actors), keynote, short case studies and presentations, networking spaces, and workshops related to management, audience strategy, distribution, data analysis, etc.

Where does Festival 3i take place?

- The main festival takes place in Rio de Janeiro, but in 2018 three 'pocket' editions of the festival were run in Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Recife to help give a platform to media in those regions of the country. In 2022, Ajor took over the management of the Festival. In March there was an online edition of the event, and in November there was a regional one, that took place in the northeast of Brazil, in Recife. In 2023, the association organised its return to in-person at Casa da Gloria, a cultural venue in the Flamengo district of Rio.

What is Festival 3i's mission/purpose?

- Festival 3i has 5 main objectives:
  • To celebrate good journalism.
  • To be a place of encounter between initiatives (a moment of networking).
  • To enable important reflections and exchange of experiences on independent journalism, and on the challenges for journalism in general.
  • To inspire new journalists to follow in our footsteps.
  • To approach the freedom of experimentation that these initiatives have.

How is Festival 3i financed/funded/sponsored?

- The Festival in 2023 was sponsored by Google, Meta, Luminate, TikTok, Fundacao Tide Setubal, and CLUA,

and funded by Ford and Oak Foundations.
What is the budget of Festival 3i?
-   US$200,000
Who is Festival 3i aimed at, and who attends?
-   Ajor's membership, funders, other journalism stakeholders, policy makers, researchers, advocates, and journalism students.
-   The Festival featured 70 guests, 50 scholarships focused on community journalism initiatives from Rio (from favelas, and according to diversity criteria), and 400 attendees in total.
How is the programme for Festival 3i developed?
-   The Ajor team works to develop the programme in conversation with regional experts.

2. Characteristics and Commonalities

There are commonalities between these events – each seeks to be part of bringing together its ecosystem, each tries to be intentionally non-hierarchical, each is supported by a mix of philanthropic donations, commercial sponsorships and institutional partnerships, and each has a very clear idea of what its identity is, and keeps ultimate control over its own programme and agenda. Of course, these are not unique characteristics to these events, or to events in the journalism world - indeed, they draw on a range of practices and ethoses that are present or have been pioneered in civil society, in tech, and in numerous other fields.

What kind of events are we talking about?

Journalism festivals like the four described in Section 1 are part of an increasingly global circuit of events (see Section 3 for a selection of others) that are looking to convene, distil and advance new journalism practices, break up hierarchies, and champion new forms of media and journalism - and many have become must-attend events in their regions, and increasingly internationally. While they are not unique, and are still industry events, many are ambitious to be more than that.

One event in particular has grown in prominence and influence in recent years: the [International Journalism Festival](#) (IJF) in Perugia, Italy. Founded in 2006, it has grown since about 2015 into the most important media event in Europe, and is increasingly a meeting point for media, funders, intermediaries and researchers from across the globe. It offers free entry for all attendees for all sessions (the total number of attendees is not tracked as events are not ticketed and do not require registration), and takes place in a variety of spectacular venues in the historic centre of Perugia. Its supporters include the Google News Initiative, the Open Society Foundations, and Craig Newmark Philanthropies. The co-founders, Arianna Ciccone and Chris Potter, and their team make all decisions about programming, from submissions made by journalists, intermediaries, funders, researchers and many others. It attracts some of the biggest names in independent and innovative journalism, hosted 538 speakers in 2023, and covers a huge range of topics pertinent to the field as it is evolving - and all sessions are available to watch on YouTube.

The distinctiveness of this combination of factors is that the IJF seems to take place throughout the entire historic centre, at all hours of the day - not just inside and in the queues for festival events, but also in local cafes, gelaterie (ice-cream parlours) and bars, on short, brisk walks along the central pedestrianised Corso Vannucci or on longer meandering walks through the medieval streets, while shopping at local stores for gifts to take home, and at lively evening dinners at which festival speakers pay with the meal tickets the IJF provides them. The sheer scale of the IJF can be overwhelming for some, and one founder noted that having the help and guidance of previous

attendees to work out how best to start navigating it was essential. This immersive, vivid, and frankly extremely enjoyable experience means that Perugia, once known primarily for the Umbria Jazz Festival, is now a byword for this new breed of event, and an absolute fixture of the global journalism calendar.

Until relatively recently, in many parts of the world many people's experience of attending a journalism or media development conference was not like going to Perugia. It was expensive, one-way, transactional, not relevant to their circumstances or resources. For employees of time- and resource-poor organisations, paying the fee to attend a conference could be a lottery, and the pay-off for their time uncertain.

These and related festivals are, by contrast, more experiential and less transactional by design. They intentionally seek to build links between participants, and in the words of Alan Soon of Splice Beta, "make sure that no one arrives at the event feeling like a stranger."

Who organises these events, and why?

Festival 3i and Media Party were founded by people directly involved in the media – the former by a group of 13 independent media, the latter by a journalist member of the [Buenos Aires chapter](#) of global journalism and technology network [Hacks/Hackers](#). In both cases, the founders felt that they needed to create an event to bring together and showcase the emerging ecosystem of innovators in independent digital media, and to help build links between them.

Festival 3i has been handed over by the independent media to Ajor, the representative body they formed to act in their collective interests, and on whose board many of them sit. Ajor's team, led by Maia Fortes, is supported to deliver the Festival by Cardapio de Ideas, an event production company.

Media Party has built a festival team that works on a volunteer basis to programme and deliver the festival each year, and in June 2023 held its first international edition in Chicago, in the USA. Mariano Blejman says that Media Party is built on the many smaller actions and interactions made by Hacks/Hackers Buenos Aires over the years, including meetups, workshops and small grants. As Media Party seeks to grow internationally, both by repeating its 2023 Chicago edition, and by exploring another edition in another part of the world, the Hacks/Hackers network could become its overall home, he says.

Splice Beta and Africa Media Festival, by contrast, were founded by organisations already working on a strategic level to connect and support their wider ecosystems – Splice Media and Baraza Media Lab respectively. Baraza's Maurice Otieno talked, for the inaugural edition of the Africa Media Festival in 2023, about "trying to raise the level of ambition of conversations in Kenya and the region, to start more future-oriented conversations, to bring together sectors and sub-sectors, and to stimulate more resources and innovation." Splice Beta is a natural extension of Splice Media's regional consulting work across Asia supporting and celebrating digital media startups and ecosystems.

Who funds or supports these events, and why?

All of the organisations have to build a patchwork of support each year to cover the costs of the event, including venues, catering, staging, management fees. The festivals all try to keep registration free or nominal, in order to ensure maximum accessibility to the sector, and sometimes to the public, but also seek specific pots of funds to support a wider range of participants and speakers cover travel and visa costs[1] .

There are four main sources for financial contributions to the four festivals, covering a mix of donations, sponsorships and partnerships:
- **Philanthropic and other funders**, such as the Ford Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Luminate, Konrad Adenaeur Stiftung, Mozilla Foundation, CLUA, and the International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM).

- **International media development intermediaries** like Deutsche Welle Akademie, IMS, Internews and **mission-driven investors** such as MDIF.
- **Tech/platform companies** such as Google, Meta, Amazon and TikTok.
- **Corporates and businesses** – ranging from international businesses to local ones.

For philanthropic funders and for intermediaries, such festivals are not only a good and cost-effective opportunity to support the wider ecosystem through direct funding of the event, but also as a venue to bring together their own national, regional and sometimes international grantees in a side-meeting, whose participation in the event they may also support. For example, MDIF held a meeting of investees and partners after Media Party, IMS held a partners' workshop after Splice Beta, and 17 funders came together for a donors' meeting focused on Kenya after the Africa Media Festival.

This can have helpful synergies with the event both allows the festival team to choose from a wider range of participants for the programme, and side-meetings before or after the event help provide space for time-poor start-ups and other organisations to discuss and work on specific challenges.

Tech platforms - principally Google and Meta - have provided significant support to some of these festivals and to the organisations behind them through their respective news and journalism programmes. Many of the staff involved in these programmes around the world have been made redundant in the past year, for example in Asia, and it is not clear what the status of the associated funding initiatives will be. In countries where new legislative and regulatory processes that would force the platforms to agree large-scale funding settlements with the news and journalism sector are under consideration, such as in Brazil and South Africa, Google is lobbying for alternatives such as fixed-term standalone funds into which it will pay, and, in Brazil, has reportedly threatened to withdraw funding from the journalism sector, should the relevant legislation pass.

Funders, intermediaries and sponsors are not monolithic categories, say festival organisers, intermediaries and funders, and vary in how they support festivals, even between regions. Some, for example, give the funds without any conditions or expectation, though they try to participate or contribute in other ways if asked. Others may offer their input and advice more proactively, and may request more directly that they or partners are involved in panels or showcases, or that topics important to them are covered in the programme. None of the four festivals featured in this briefing have an explicit funding ethics policy, but they do maintain independent control of their programmes (as described in further detail in a subsequent section of the report), and there is no 'pay-for-play' for financial contributors to their respective events.

One founder noted that businesses and sponsors can sometimes leave it quite late before they commit to supporting an event, as little as a month before the event itself, as they want to see the final shape of the programme, speaker list, and even attendees or sign-ups. Another mentioned that offering multi-year support or sponsorship would be a helpful signal from financial supporters.

Other kinds of donors from whom similar events around the world have secured support include international bilateral donors, as well as embassies and cultural institutes, and local or national government bodies, including city authorities, regional governments, and ministries such as tourism, culture, or media.

Risks and benefits related to funding

While in the past, some founders said they met with initial scepticism from specialised donors and intermediaries regarding their events, they report that these actors are still among the earliest to spot the value and quality in such events, and to offer regular and unrestricted financial support. This helps such events find space to find their feet, and is one that philanthropies and intermediaries play in respect of several similar events around the world.

Donors' attendance and participation in the programme can be a positive and a signal of engagement and transparency. Whether holding an open Q&A, or moderating sessions, or generally being accessible, they can add value and insight to discussions and to participants. In the case of the Africa Media Festival, this afforded Baraza Media Lab the rare opportunity of holding a closed meeting of 17 funders - some involved in or supporting the Festival, others not - all involved in funding in Kenya, in order to discuss issues and challenges in common, and to increase the flow of information between these diverse actors. Mariano Blejman says that when bringing representatives from tech funders like Google or Meta, Media Party tried to ensure that they have substantive expertise in product or engineering, rather than solely in policy or communications.

In precarious sectors like independent digital media, trust and transparency are paramount, and perceptions of funder influence, especially in closing or polarised societies, can be damaging. But where donors or sponsors appear prominently on the agenda, there can be - attendees, including donors, said - a risk of perception of undue influence, unwarranted deference, or that they have a priority lane. While this is not a new issue for events of this kind, some funders or intermediaries expect to be included – or organisers feel they should be - within the programme in return for the funding they provide. For intermediaries in particular, their financial support for a particular event, and their participation, or that of their partners, in a panel or an event can be used as evidence of impact, and something on which they can report to their own donors, or use in their own fundraising.

Donors (including others with resources, such as intermediaries and investors) can also have a potentially distorting or distracting effect simply by virtue of their attendance at an event. Many participants, donors included, use such events as a way to take meetings with a lot of people in the ecosystem, region or nation - it can be, for example, a valuable and efficient way of developing a 'pipeline', or a list of prospective grantees or partners. For some participants, meeting or pitching donors becomes a significant, if not the main purpose of attending - and as a consequence, can be an exhausting experience for the donor representative too. For grant-seekers without experience or connections, for example those who at Festival 3i referred to themselves as 'peripheral media' - smaller, local, indigenous, Black, favela or rural media - they reported finding approaching donors intimidating.

Donors sometimes also pay for grantees to attend, and then organise to have a portfolio / partner / strategic meeting alongside. While this is an efficient use of time and resources for the donor and for the grantees, this has the side-effect of turning the festivals into a part of the funding economy and ecosystem. At Splice Beta, one participant, noting the number of staff from Global North donors and intermediaries (approximately 20 people), summed up the dynamic as "Northern money, Asian expertise" - this of course also reflects the current reality of the journalism funding environment, that there are [comparatively few funding sources from Asia or indeed other regions](#), compared to those from the Global North.

Another significant risk to independent media's perceived independence comes in environments where funding is becoming more scarce, and where other sources of money step forward to fill the gap. A participant at Splice Beta noted that the [Local Media Summit](#) in Jakarta, Indonesia, which had taken place the week before, and which brought together a range of independent media from across the country, also received donations, in addition to other more usual funders and sponsors of independent journalism, from a tobacco company's foundation, an oil/gas company, a coal company and a petrochemicals company. Other organisations in the Indonesian ecosystem were uncomfortable with this, citing a risk of reputation-washing or greenwashing.

How are the programmes developed?

Each festival has a slightly different audience and set of stakeholders, and as such, as noted in Section 1, its process for developing its programme or agenda differs. Most use a mix of methods to gather ideas – from open submissions, to advisory input from experts, partners and funders. Each organising team has full editorial control over the shape, formats and content of the agenda for their particular event.

Splice Beta tends to focus on practical, useful knowledge and sessions, including organising one-on-one clinics with mentors carefully matched with startups. The team receives applications and suggestions from people who would like to attend Splice Beta, and then they assess what the best mix of people and skills will be, allocate places, and then start developing potential sessions and workshops based on this mix. Part of their consideration is what each individual, regardless of status, brings to the group, what knowledge and expertise they can share, and others with whom they might form fruitful connections. In 2023, the team is starting to experiment with using AI tools in their CMS to help them surface patterns and gaps, and to assist them in curating the event.

Media Party has a three-day structure involving keynotes, workshops, a media fair, and a public hackathon. They accept submissions via an open-call, from which they start to identify potential keynotes and workshops, but also curate to raise issues of note. They also have a track called 'Serendipity', in which they bring (often from abroad) people from outside the media sector, or with a very different approach or viewpoint, to share what they are doing. They also issue an open call for participation in their Media Fair. Sometimes, the character of Media Party matches well with another organisation's needs. In the 2022 edition, media development organisation IWPR organised a session for 13 digital media from complex environments in Latin America to pitch project ideas, on which 4 judges, including the author of this report, offered feedback.

As with all events of this type, the organisers say they need to balance competing aspects. They want to showcase the best and most interesting media entrepreneurs and practitioners from their region, and from elsewhere, where possible. They need to balance recognised expert figures and moderators with a greater diversity among the speakers and attendees. They want to experiment with formats and ideas, while delivering usable practical value to participants. They want to maintain control over their unique identity while needing to attract and deliver value for funders, sponsors and partners.

Community-building within the event

The festivals featured in this briefing go beyond networking into community-building - as Mariano Blejman says, "It's not just a place to exchange business cards and sell things." In bringing people together from discrete fields in journalism, tech and business, he says that Media Party aims to give them each an "immersive experience" into areas that they don't normally engage with, in a safe environment where they can make connections and relationships with specialists from other fields.

Festival 3i draws on the growing Ajor community, and uses the Festival to showcase particular themes within the members, and as a way to build links between them. In the 2023 edition, the team provided a platform to media dealing with racial and spatial injustice, such as media from favelas and indigenous areas, and from the poorer Northeast of Brazil. As the numbers of indigenous, Black, favela and other 'peripheral' media grow, their voices – even caucuses – within Ajor grow too, and the character and focus of the Festival will evolve accordingly.

Splice Beta has a dedicated networking channel for before, during and after the event on Telegram, but this is an offshoot of Splice Media's own ongoing online community-building efforts through their general Telegram community, and through their Slack community, Planet Splice. Splice demonstrates forensic attention to detail and deep and continuous engagement in the community – in advance of Splice Beta, they even shared information on how to use digital business cards.

For the Africa Media Festival, these aspects will become clearer as the team programmes the second edition. Maurice Otieno make one observation, however, that many of these events attract students either as volunteers or in the audience, and are in societies where a vast majority are under the age of 35. Otieno says that those programming such events, and those speaking, should be mindful, while not sugarcoating the situation facing independent media worldwide, that part of the purpose and outlook of these events is to share hope for the future, and to inspire younger journalists and new entrants, and not to demoralise them.

Relationship with the broader ecosystem

All the events featured in this brief are deeply connected and committed to their respective journalism and media ecosystems.

Media Party grew out of the local innovation ecosystem in Buenos Aires and Argentina more broadly, and continues to be extremely linked to it, including by supporting 20 spaces for media based outside the capital. It actively programmes new and challenging ideas relevant to the news industry, such as Web 3 and DAOs, or in its Chicago edition, AI. For Media Party, bringing together the tech, business and journalism ecosystems is a key priority - but bringing the right people and specialists into contact with each other takes considerable work and persuasion. Mariano Blejman says for example that "It takes a lot of energy to connect to the AI industry. We're supposed to know these people, but in reality, the ones working on really cutting-edge stuff in San Francisco or wherever are really far away from the media industry. In reality these industries are not connected in the way they should be. In Chicago we managed to get OpenAI, and Hugging Face, Vox Media, and the BBC in the same room as everybody else, sharing what they are working on, what they are worried about, thinking about issues like provenance, intellectual property, and so on."

Festival 3i grew out of a group of 13 Brazilian independent media, and in 2023 Ajor, the sector body they helped to form, took over responsibility for the Festival, and so is intimately intertwined with its own ecosystem. It is however well-aware that a) it needs to expand its own membership to more racially diverse and spatially diverse groups and places, and b) that it represents just one layer of the discussion, and other events in Brazil (e.g. Fala!) go deeper into issues of equity and justice in journalism, or take a different format, such as the [Piaui Globonews Journalism Festival](). The 'pocket' editions it held in three locations around Brazil in 2018 were designed to provide a platform for media in those parts of the country.

Splice is intimately connected with the startup ecosystem it covers, and tries to add value by bringing together people from across the entire media ecosystem and value chain, including startups, infrastructure organisations, and financial actors. The intimacy and frequency of contact among the wider Splice community means that the Splice team are well aware of the diverse challenges facing digital media in Asia, and can programme the Festival to help address some of those challenges.

The Africa Media Festival is in its first year, and is therefore still finding its way with relation to the local ecosystem. Baraza Media Lab is seen as an ecosystem actor, with a reputation for independence, which is a helpful profile. The first edition attracted high-value participants from across 18 African countries, and the team hopes to diversify this further and more intentionally in its second edition.

This organic relationship between the organisers, the festival and the independent media ecosystem appears to be an essential factor for the success and integrity of these events, and for the independent media ecosystem community to feel that it is being held in their interests.

3. Impact on independent media sustainability

The festivals featured in this briefing do not systematically track impacts that happen for attendees as a result of taking part in these events. They are small, understaffed teams, some working on a volunteer basis, but they all receive anecdotal feedback and validation from their communities, and they do survey attendees/participants. All the founders are thinking about how they can practically and efficiently capture something of the different types of value that their events create and bring about – not least because they need this in order to fundraise.

For this introductory briefing, participants in the festivals offered insights into what they found, and what they gained, from the respective events they attended.

Antonio Junião, Co-founder, Ponte Jornalismo, São Paulo, Brazil
Festival 3i is the first festival focused on issues facing digital media, and it was created by Brazilian digital media organisations, including my organisation, Ponte Jornalismo, to discuss the journalism field without interference, or centred, on hegemonic media in Brazil.

I have been involved in organising 3i since the first edition in 2017, and it's interesting to see how it has improved the level of discussion about digital journalism here. It has brought media outlets from all over Brazil, from other parts of Latin America and from other parts of the world here, and we can see how the problems and the difficulties of creating an organisation, nonprofit or for profit, are the same in every continent. For example, issues related to sustainability are the most painful for our organisations, and this kind of gathering helped us to engage with a wider range of ideas, like exchanging experiences of membership programs in Latin America or Europe, about business models, or investigative journalism and to see what does and does not work in each case.

Creating and running the Festival also challenged us as digital media - how could we impact the wider field in Brazil as a relatively small group? How could we act together and do advocacy to have an impact on public policies in our country? Through the experience of building and running 3i, we realised we needed to create a network or association with more organisations, and so AJOR (Digital Journalism Association) was born, and now it has also taken over organising the Festival.

3i also led directly to the creation in 2020 of another journalism festival in Brazil, FALA, focused on journalism, culture and art, and started by four outlets, Ponte Jornalismo, Alma Preta, Marco Zero and 1Papo Reto. In the first edition of 3i, I had learned about the Guatemalan investigative journalism outlet Nomada, who had an interesting part of their business model, holding public parties and cultural festivals, bringing together journalism, communication, culture and art. I started thinking that this might be an interesting way to approach communication and the diversity of cultures in Brazil too, including cultural forms more popular among younger people, like slam, visual arts, theatre and music into dialogue with journalism. I worked on the idea for months, until the next edition of 3i, where I talked with other outlets - Marco Zero and Alma Preta - about trying to launch this new festival focused on how arts and culture could help journalism be more inclusive and democratic - and we also talked with Open Society Foundations and Google to ask them to support this idea. So FALA! Festival of Communication, Journalism, Culture and Art was born at 3i, and it's going to hold its fourth edition this year.

Tricia Acqino, PumaPodcast, Philippines
PumaPodcast carried out a teaching workshop at Splice Beta on "how to understand your audience", following an IMS-supported audience study of Puma's listeners carried out in late 2021. "I learned that journalists around the

region are pursuing similar advocacies as we are, whether it be protecting the environment, empowering women, or fighting disinformation. This has allowed us to seek cross-border and multi-platform partnerships, whether in applying for story grants with an Indian podcasting company; providing podcasting knowledge to a Mongolian reporter; or turning our podcasts into easily digestible Instagram posts with a Filipino social media-first startup."

After Splice Beta, Puma Podcast was inspired to invest further in growing their communications and partnerships teams and have demonstrated that while they have grown significantly in the past few years, and doubled their revenue in 2022, the ceiling for growth is still far higher. According to the Puma team, meeting other media entrepreneurs inspired them to raise their ambitions for the growth of the company, allowing them to expand their audience reach.

James Smart, Managing Editor, Newsroom Production - Nation Media Group, Kenya
For a long time conversations about media, its progress, and how it can thrive have been organized around select geographical locations outside the continent. This has contributed to the uneven progress of journalism and media. The absolute value we are getting by having these events [like Africa Media Festival] now in East Africa and mostly inside the continent is that we get an opportunity to be the masters of our own destiny, and shape our future with our reality, including finding collaboration opportunities among media companies.

Miguel Paz, Founder, Reveniu, Chile
MediaParty became a hub to meet folks from multiple countries from the news and technology spaces, connecting curious, talented people with strong leadership skills that later on would create alliances and partnerships, and come up with new projects. The structure and quality of the event serves as a cross-border catalyser within Latin America and beyond.

Being there at the event itself has made (in part) various - failed and successful - projects possible. For example, the internationalisation of Poderopedia to Venezuela happened because we discussed it in-person at Media Party with Nela Balbi from IPYS Venezuela; also some influence-mapping prototypes and international projects, and some cross-border investigative projects, to name just a few.

Anonymous media founder, Brazil - on Festival 3i
It's important to have events that bring together the community of entrepreneurs and founders of new media, and that are inspiring. I like to go there to feel the temperature of the field, meet media I admire and reconnect with those I already knew. But we do need to discuss the challenges and obstacles, as for those on stage it might seem it's all very easy, while for those listening, maybe they feel a little helpless. An important differentiator of Festival 3i was also that they brought funders into the conversation to listen and exchange - as the funding situation for journalism in Brazil this year is a little more difficult and this restricts the possibilities a little.

María Paula Murcia Huertas, Manager of Analysis and Impact, Mutante, Colombia
What we get from being at an event like Media Party is the possibility of meeting other organisations working on similar issues so we can build alliances and potential future collaborations. There is also the opportunity to learn from other projects that have created innovations that are relevant and useful for the entire world, and that can be adapted and implemented by different types of newsrooms. But above all, these events allow us to go beyond screens to create links between people that strengthen collaboration, learning and care networks in what are difficult environments for journalism in Latin America. I brought back ideas from Media Party, but I also brought friends - and now some of them are also colleagues, thanks to the fact that we were able to meet there.

In concrete terms, as a result of one of the workshops at Media Party, we have implemented ways to measure our impact that we had not considered before. We also started working with a new development team that we already knew, but that we met again in person at Media Party. Finally, we had the chance to meet in-person with representatives of an organisation to whom we were in the process of applying for a grant - and we ended up winning the grant (perhaps this meeting helped…).

4. Three Emerging Patterns

Hypothesis 1: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

The new breed of events brings a character and energy intentionally different to and more diverse and inclusive than traditional journalism conferences.

In calling themselves 'Festivals', or in one case, 'Party', these events are consciously signalling that they are very different to more formal and hierarchical events. The word 'festival' connotes celebration, community and conviviality, and each of the events embraces this identity in its own way, while still being a space of work.

Through attractive branding and identity, a distinctive voice and personality, prominent and visible founders and team, a beautiful or engaging location, and a focus on experiences, not just on sessions, they offer something distinctive and memorable to participants, and seek to build bonds as a community.

Each festival team works hard to programme and curate not only the mix of formats and topics, but also to take into account what the speakers and other participants will contribute to the event, and what they can offer to other participants, whether presenting or not.

While they might include some elements and formats from more traditional conferences – panels, keynotes, presentations, stages - these are more informal and fluid events, and find ways to disrupt the hierarchised and formal structure of classical 'broadcast'-style conferences. Hierarchy is discouraged, and maximal inclusivity and interaction is encouraged. To emphasise the lack of hierarchy and the need for organic cross-pollination, Media Party organises the tables in its Media Fair alphabetically, meaning, for example, that tech titan Google might have a small stand between Estilo Libre, a volunteer media outlet covering freestyle rap battles, and La Izquierda Diario, a newspaper belonging to the Socialist Workers Party in Argentina.

They often build different formats, or varied modes of discussion or encounter, from one-on-one clinics to hackathons, from workshops to pitching sessions, from study tours to local cultural outings, to ensure that the programme offers diverse textures and experiences, and that a significant proportion of the time is given over to more informal connection and discussion. They also understand that participants' time is valuable, and that the event should give them practical value – through a variety of more experiential sessions, they provide practical skills and intelligence that can be taken, adapted and applied.

Inclusion practices at the core

Equity, diversity and inclusion are core values of each festival. One founder observed that one strong motivation for starting their festival was that a lot of conferences were still dominated by panels of white men, and by examples from the USA and UK media, rather than examples from more comparable media or markets.

Part of doing things differently means expressing particular signals about the culture of the event – what is acceptable, and what is not, and what are priorities and what is not? Pushing against patriarchy is increasingly key - many of these events actively program to ensure or indeed overcorrect on gender balance. Manels are essentially taboo. Splice Beta tracks a range of parameters, including gender balance, and publishes the results after each edition.

A culture of safety at festivals that bring together people from across the globe in fluid, often informal settings is crucial. The lines between social and professional contexts can get blurred, and incidents of sexual harassment, sexism or other infringements do occur. Events of this kind increasingly need a code of conduct that expresses

their values and. Splice prioritised developing a [Code of Conduct](#), clearly and firmly communicated this to all participants, and set up reporting lines to handle any incidents, which provides a good example to other events around the world for how to frame and handle such situations.

Alongside this, festival teams should acknowledge and prepare for dealing with colleagues who are experiencing burnout, trauma, or other pressures. (The Africa Media Festival created, for this purpose, a 'wellbeing space' at the venue.) Many of those in the sector are experiencing extreme challenges with keeping their media financially afloat, alongside lawsuits, threats and intimidation. Some have faced dangerous and fraught exile out of their home countries, and are living in uncertain or precarious settings abroad. This also means that festivals and those that support them financially need to take security seriously.

More broadly, Splice Beta has an explicit aim to ensure that the space within the festival is accessible, diverse and inclusive, and this includes reporting transparently on key metrics, such as gender balance in attendees and speakers, national origin, and whether they're a first-time attendee or not, in order to track the growth and evolution of the community. They keep a [running list of questions](#) related to access, equity and inclusion that they are asking themselves and their community to reflect on.

Festival 3i built in other kinds of inclusion practices to try to ensure maximum accessibility to all communities through providing, for example, inclusive approaches for persons with disabilities with hearing or sight, such as on-stage signing and [self-description by speakers](#), as well as simultaneous translation for multiple languages (Portuguese, Spanish and English).

Ajor, as an industry body, is partly funded by philanthropy to expand its membership, and participation in Festival 3i, to more diverse groups – like Black journalism and indigenous journalism. Before Ajor took over running the festival, the organisers decided in 2018, that, given the geographic scale of Brazil, and the spatial inequality between its regions, they should hold 'Pocket editions' in cities in other parts of Brazil, increasing outreach, and complementing existing festivals in those regions such as the [Fala! Festival](#) in Recife (which, as Antonio Junião of Ponte Jornalismo notes in Section 3, was itself conceived at Festival 3i).

Mariano Blejman says that Media Party is grounded in its local and regional community through Hacks/Hackers and other intersections with other grassroots networks, and as such, although they do not have an explicit diversity policy, it is a core concern of theirs as they programme the agenda. In the 2022 edition, they brought 20 media from across Argentina to the festival, to ensure a balance with Buenos Aires-based media. He says that part of the function of Media Party is to reflect the diversity of thinking and practice in journalism, tech and business globally, and to bring this into contact with the Latin American ecosystem, and this also involves seeking out more diverse approaches to and entrepreneurs within journalism fields worldwide, as well as locally.

As these diverse events grow in prominence and influence, the practices they follow ought also to become influential within the sector. When asked about other challenges they foresee, team members and festival participants mentioned:
- Challenging the assumption of English as the lingua franca, which privileges some, and excludes many potential participants – this is common to all regions
- Addressing and incorporating linguistic diversity in Africa, Asia, and Latin America
- Ensuring that in-person events are accessible to persons who have a disability with mobility
- Ensuring both diversity and reasonably regular turnover in participants and speakers, to try to avoid becoming predictable or comfortable
- Trying to find ways to avoid capital-centric thinking, and to take the festival to other locations and communities.

Hypothesis 2: Cultural, Economic and Social Capital

These events build the capital of journalism as a legitimate and valuable activity that brings cultural, economic and societal value locally and internationally.

These events position journalism, and independent digital media particularly, as an exciting, diversifying, and successful field, are skilfully branded, and are often led by particular personalities that are energetic, convivial and widely respected. Once of sufficient prominence, they hope for a centripetal force that draws a wider range of stakeholders to want to be present, involved or featured - and for funders and sponsors to be associated - while still maintaining a rigorous independence and character.

Each of the events featured in this report tries hard to provide a unique, memorable, and multi-faceted experience to participants, in locations that have many affordances and attractions, from striking venues in the Latin American cities of Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires, to a deep dive into the creative cultures of Nairobi and Chiang Mai. The festivals try to act as ambassadors for the place, for other parts of the local and regional media and creative ecosystem, and for the topics and issues they have programmed - including as a conduit from local to global, and vice-versa.

As one influential paper on experience economy approaches puts it, the key is "Vivid Memory and Attendee Loyalty"[2]. (The literature on journalism festivals still appears quite nascent, compared to the broader field of Events Studies.)

The Africa Media Festival curated a study tour for attendees the day before the Festival, including visits to other creative industries, such as local production house Buni Media, regional media giant Nation Media Group, and a local art studio collective. Media Party included a Media Fair, giving a wider range of local and regional media an opportunity to connect with participants in the Festival, as did the Africa Media Festival. Other local businesses may receive either direct or spillover benefits – for example, a number of artisanal food stallholders were invited to set up a mini streetfood market inside Festival 3i's venue.

Cultural initiatives such as "Hay Festival", "Aspen Ideas Festival" or "Perugia International Journalism Festival" are initiatives that renew the cultural offer and allow the city in question to be located for a few weeks at the epicentre of global cultural life[3].

While at this point, these events are not yet on the cultural map at the same scale as, for example, Perugia, they may still be able to leverage local tourism promotion schemes, cultural heritage initiatives or locations, regional development funds, political patronage, commercial sponsorship, and other forms of capital and support. In some settings, where politics is polarised, and where such local sources of funding are perceived as such too, founders said that accepting such funding can risk alienating political opponents - though once a festival has a longer track record of independence, and where it can point to the wider cultural, social and economic value it brings to a place or region, this can be less of a concern.

Media or creative clusters, media labs and innovation districts, where they exist, could be a significant partner for media festivals. In South Africa, for example, four distinct events – jamfest, Fak'ugesi, CITF and AIJC - were able to link up over the course of a month in 2022 in partnership with the Tshimologong Innovation District.

Contribution to the media ecosystem

The four festivals featured in this discussion paper range from an invite-only curated convening to festivals that provide access or tickets to the public. But for the four festivals, unlike for IJF, at this point at least, the public dimension appears less important than the relationship with their respective domestic and regional ecosystems.

For Ajor, in particular, as a sectoral body for the independent media sector, part of their aim – says Natalia Viana, outgoing President - is to build the profile of the independent digital media sector as an **economic** sector, comprised of media owners, employers, contributors to national and local economies, and as such, a sector that needs tailored policies and incentives to support its stability and growth. The festival plays a part in building the profile of the sector, and a platform for independent media and those that support them to interface with politicians, policy makers, large tech and content platforms, and, of course, funders. The 2023 edition of Festival 3i came 3 days after a [national controversy](#) over a bill to regulate platforms, including Google – an issue that affects many in the independent sector, including Ajor, given how many organisations receive funding from Google.

For Baraza Media Lab, Maurice Otieno has said publicly both that "conversations [about the existential crisis facing media] can not be done within individual media organisations' board rooms or solved by one organisation," but also that a single three-day conference will not solve everything at one fell swoop. The team designed the diverse spaces within the Africa Media Festival to be more ambitious, future-oriented, and cross-disciplinary, and to stimulate more resources and innovation in Kenya, East Africa and the wider continent.

Splice Media are, through Alan Soon and Rishad Patel, well known in the wider global independent media and innovation ecosystem, building on the strong and growing community they have facilitated through their work in Asia. Holding Splice Beta in Chiang Mai also provides a close link with the local ecosystem of Myanmar media in exile, and the 2022 edition featured innovative Myanmar media prominently. Splice do not systematically track how taking part in Splice Beta impacts on participants, but Soon says that they do receive a lot of anecdotal feedback from attendees and community members. They report, he says, that participating in the Splice community and in Beta has helped them in a variety of ways, including in accessing funds, or rethinking aspects of their strategy, or in just having the confidence to go forward.

Hypothesis 3: Shifting Perceptions of Journalism

Events of this kind help to shift perceptions not only about journalism in the Global South, but about journalism in general.

The global discourse about journalism and media innovation has long been heavily dominated by voices and examples from the Global North, in the English language, and especially from the USA and UK. Publishing in the media development sphere is also dominated by Global North-based organisations, even if sometimes done in partnership with Global South partners. Global North experiences and paradigms of media have in general been pushed as the default.

While many of the values Global North journalism and media espouse are also shared by their fellow public interest media in the Global South, the experiences of Global South media are far more typical of the conditions faced by media globally than those in the diminishing number of strong and resilient democracies.

Multiple structural barriers still exist that impede those with deep expertise in the Global South from being able to talk about media in a global context, rather than just from their own country's perspective. In the same way, events in the Global South are just as global and representative (if not even more so) than ones in or curated by the Global North. Words such as 'decolonisation', 'sovereignty' and 'agency' came up repeatedly in conversations at these events, both on stage and in other settings - but with a recognition that resources for independent media and events such as these are still coming largely from the Global North. In some places, such as Brazil, there was also a strong recognition of disparities of power between white and Black/indigenous people in the independent media.

There is a balance to be struck by all such events between foregrounding what is distinctive and unique in their region, and their desire also to participate in and influence global debates about journalism and media. All four festivals express a desire for more direct South-South exchange – and this is becoming an increasingly impor-

tant part of the value and function of these events. Media startups are leading the redefinition of media through experimentation and agility, and these events are essential for them to demonstrate that capability.

Festival 3i, for example, while largely focused on the Brazilian independent media environment, does have some international participation. Many Brazilian participants said that they were keen to connect and share internationally, both with peers in the Global South, and in global debates and settings. Similarly, Mariano Blejman would like to seed more interaction at Media Party with startups and innovators in Asia and other global regions, and to hold an edition in Asia, Africa, the Middle East or Europe.

As a regional, Asia-focused/-based consulting firm, Splice Media has built a strong and increasingly global community of innovation-oriented start-ups and related organisations. Alan Soon says that, while they are Asia-focused, they have found in fact that there are strong commonalities between the digital media startups they connect with all over the globe, not just in Asia. He thinks that anyone coming from anywhere around the world would slip comfortably into the space they have created at Splice Beta. OSF brought a number of innovative digital media grantees from around the world, including Brazil and the MENA region, to the 2022 edition of Splice Beta.

5. The Wider Landscape of Journalism Festivals

As the calendars maintained by the Global Forum for Media Development (GFMD) and the Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN) show, barely a week goes by without an event related to independent public interest media or media innovation somewhere around the world. Yet – even if many are adopting some practices similar to those employed by the new breed of festivals - not all these events are trying to affect the ecosystem in the same way, or with the same objectives.

That said, there are numerous festival-like events taking place in a growing variety of places, that also serve as a platform for initiatives to strengthen media ecosystems locally and internationally, such as press freedom advocacy, statements or declarations related to key sectoral issues, launches of products or initiatives, funding rounds, or prizes:

- Many of the events in the investigative journalism calendar:
  • The Global Investigative Journalism Conference (GIJC)
  • The regional ARIJ Forum in Amman, Jordan
  • The regional African Investigative Journalism Conference (AIJC), which in 2022 coordinated with Fak'ugesi African Digital Innovation Festival, JamLab's JamFest and Civic Tech Innovation Forum (CTIF) to effectively create a month-long hybrid festival in the Tshimologong Innovation District in Johannesburg, South Africa
  • The regional European Dataharvest conference in Mechelen, Belgium, which has developed thematic collaborative networks, which help to sustain conversations between editions of the conference and others like the Logan Symposium in the USA, and DIG Festival in Italy.
- Festival Gabriel García Márquez de Periodismo (or Festival Gabo) in Colombia (est 2013) builds on the legacy of the celebrated Colombian writer and journalist, and brings journalism into contact with writers, philosophers, artists and other disciplines. It has grown steadily in size and prominence over its 11 editions, which since the pandemic have taken place in Bogota rather than Medellin.
- The 2023 ZEG Storytelling Festival in Georgia brought, alongside local, regional and international figures

from independent journalism, writing, photography and other storytelling disciplines, Hollywood actor Sean Penn and writer/producer Armando Iannucci. It also organises side activities such as history, art and gastronomy walking tours, film screenings, and workshops. The European Press Prize chose to announce their 2023 prize winners at ZEG, having announced the shortlisted entries at Perugia.

- The Lviv Media Forum (est 2013), in Ukraine, is the second largest media event in Europe after Perugia's IJF, and describes itself as an "ecosystem of people, organizations and projects that develops comprehensive media solutions and promotes the best global media practices in Ukraine. We work to make Ukrainian media viable — global, professional, ethical and capable."

- The regional Google-convened Newsgeist conferences – which took over from the O'Reilly/Knight Foundation NewsFoo convenings – are invite-only and designed around an unconference format. They have in the past asked participants to nominate other people who should attend in their place in subsequent editions. The most recent was in Brazil in May 2023, but with Google's journalism funding and initiatives in question, it is not clear if these will continue.

- Other European festivals addressing the journalism, media and information ecosystem include Festival de L'Info Locale and Campfire, part of a growing number of similar events in France and Germany respectively; the Internazionale Festival (linked to the magazine of the same name) in Ferrara, and the Memoria Festival (about different aspects of memory, often including journalists and journalism) in Mirandola, both in Italy; Personal Democracy Forum CEE, which convened the civic engagement, transparency, tech and democracy fields in Central and Eastern Europe; and the M100 SansSouci Colloquium, which brings together 100 representatives of independent media from across Europe with other stakeholders in politics and science, and "is an integral part of Potsdam's identity as a media city".

As the boundaries between journalism and adjacent fields, such as digital rights, have blurred, topics and speakers are cross-percolating more and more, as the schedules for RightsCon, Digital Rights Asia-Pacific (DRAPAC), and Mozilla Festival all attest. Each of these involves widespread consultation and input on the content of their programme – for example, DRAPAC explained in depth the process of building their 2023 Festival.

While many participants (including funders and intermediaries) in these festivals do write short articles or posts on blogs or social media about festivals, they usually focus on the content of sessions, and what they did or learned there - there is little written about the more structural aspects of what they are trying to do. In terms of academic research, the field of event studies[4] is fairly recent, and within it, there appears to have been little published on journalism events per se. There is an emerging cluster of work looking at the phenomenon of 'live journalism'[5], which crosses over with performance studies. Some studies do note the role of journalists as mediators, moderators or interviewers within other kinds of cultural festivals, such as book festivals, or science festivals, but there appear to be few if any papers that mention journalism festivals as a distinct new approach.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

These four events, and ones like them across the Global South, are helping to rebalance international debates about journalism, innovation and media viability.

There are three areas in particular where journalism festival organisers and those that support them should pay particular attention.

Independence and editorial control

- Festivals could develop a funding ethics policy, to make clear to stakeholders and the public when and from whom they will and will not accept funding, and under what circumstances

- Festivals addressing the independent public interest media ecosystem could be more explicit and transparent about how they develop their programme, how they solicit input, and how they review their activities. This could involve:
  • A clear public statement or flowchart outlining how the agenda is developed.
  • Being clear where slots are sponsored by third-party organisations versus programmed by the team.
  • Forming an expert Advisory or Steering Committee to provide input to the core Festival team.
  • Holding a forum or consultation with partners and funders to held identify priority questions and areas.

- Funders or supporters of festivals or similar events should respect their editorial and decision-making independence. This could be by:
  • Firewalling their core support for the event from any substantive involvement in the programme or participant list.
  • Offering multi-year support
  • Ensuring that plans to hold side-meetings or convenings of their own grantees or partners are planned in concert with the organisers, who should retain control over who, if any, are featured in the programme.

Equity, diversity and inclusion

- Festivals should continue and extend their efforts at inclusivity and to be attentive to the culture that is enabled in the spaces they create, including:
  • Publishing diversity figures.
  • For persons with disabilities (e.g. with hearing, sight or mobility), such as signing, self-description, sensitive language guides, or accessible venues.
  • For multiple language support, including on event panels, through simultaneous translation (automated approaches as implemented at IJF 2023 may not yet be of sufficient quality or reliability).
  • Finding ways to facilitate 'youth takeovers', Future Generations thinking, or other techniques to involve and foreground relevant perspectives and expertise of younger people.

- Festivals and similar events should consult on and publish a clear Code of Conduct for participants and speakers, including:
  • Ensuring that participants feel included, safe and secure, and have easy access to support and assistance, should they need it.

  • Publishing and making all participants sign up to clear policies and reporting routes, and clear actions/sanctions for violations of policies.

- Funders and intermediaries should continue to support existing festivals' efforts to open up to wider communities, and new initiatives that experiment with alternative events, spaces and audiences. (Some of those spoken to for this report suggested that a commitment to gender equity should be a requirement of funding such events – though not all agreed.)

- Researchers should examine the impact on the broader journalism ecosystem of these events, and their approach both to EDI and to types of journalism. E.g.:
  • Researchers should keep track of who is speaking at which events, and how this is changing over time.

- All stakeholders in such events should prepare collectively for problems with passports and visas for journalists and others to cross borders to access events. E.g.:
  • Consult with Access Now and its community on the lessons from the visa crisis in Costa Rica ahead of their 2023 meeting.

Public and ecosystem value

- Researchers should be supported to study this emerging class of events in more depth and with more rigour, in order to:
  • Better understand and define their characteristics and qualities, and the specific conditions in which they grow and thrive.
  • Better articulate and track the different kinds of social, cultural and economic value that such events create and multiply – including short-term economic effects for locations and local businesses where such events are held
  • Provide a stronger platform for policy advocacy supporting the economic, cultural and social values of this class of events.

Sameer Padania runs Macroscope, which works with journalists, funders, investors, researchers, policy-makers and others, at the global level, and in different regions and countries around the world, to help defend, transform and grow the public interest journalism and information ecosystem.

Notes

1 As demonstrated by RightsCon in Costa Rica in 2023, this is no guarantee that those travelling from e.g. Africa, will be able to pass through borders without either significant delays or harassment, or being arbitrarily turned away. Access board member Nanjala Nyabola tweeted about her experience: https://twitter.com/Nanjala1/status/1668323268443660290?s=20
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IMS (International Media Support) is an NGO working for global press freedom supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.

IMS

International Media Support