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# country report

Country Office Uganda and South Sudan

## An Overview of the Media Landscape in South Sudan

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For democratic ideals and values to be nurtured and promoted in the world's youngest country, both new and old media must be strengthened. This brief outlines the complex terrain in which the media in South Sudan operates. It summarily highlights the roles that the media plays and the challenges that the sector faces. Most importantly, the brief discusses some opportunities for making both traditional and new media effective for advancing a future democratic society in the country.

### Traditional media is still key

In South Sudan, traditional journalism still reigns supreme. Newspapers being vended on the streets of Juba City are a common sight. There are three major national newspapers in South Sudan namely The Dawn, The Citizen, and The City Review. The oldest and most popular newspaper, Juba Monitor, was suspended in April 2022 over disputes about legal ownership. About a dozen radio stations, such as Radio Bakhita, Radio Miraya, Eye Radio, Capital FM, City FM, and Advance FM, among others operate within Juba City. About 26 radio stations operate across the vast expanse of South Sudan's ten states. Generally, radio is still the most important and popular medium of accessing information and entertainment services among the country's 11 million people. South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC) is the only operational TV station in the country. As a national media corporation, it specifically broadcasts progovernment content. Internationally, Voice of America (VOA) has a specifically strong presence in the country with their South Sudan in Focus program which is accessible both online and on the radio. Other international mainstream news platforms such as BBC, Aljazeera, CNN, etc. can be accessed via digital satellite channels.

Whilst traditional media is still key in South Sudan, mainstream media organizations face significant

changes pertaining to economic viability and media freedom. Over the past 10 years, more than five newspapers have closed down due to tough business operational conditions. With little profit margins, quality content creation is a farfetched reality as media houses cannot invest in quality journalism which is an extremely expensive venture. Most newspapers have just six pages, with some stories copied and pasted from external sources. Again, media organizations in South Sudan have to censor their content due to the strong-handedness of the National Security Services and the National Communication Authority. These agencies have in many cases clumped down and/or summoned media organizations, such as Eye Radio, for publishing content critical of the government and the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS) for organizing activities without giving prior notice to the NSS.

### What are the digital media opportunities?

Only about 11% of the South Sudanese population have access to the internet. This is one of the lowest internet penetration rates in the world. This means that prospects for digital communications are still slim. This explains why only two major digital news platforms operate in South Sudan, namely, Eye Radio and Radio

Tamazuj websites. The Internet World Stats indicates that only 1.8% of the population of South Sudan has access to social media platforms. Facebook is most used at 80%, followed YouTube at 9%, Twitter at 8%, LinkedIn at 3%, Pinterest by at 0.4%, and Instagram at 0.3%. The downside of digital media in South Sudan is that it has made it so easy for fake news and hate speech to proliferate. In fact, during both the 2013 and 2016 conflicts that engulfed the country, social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp platforms were used for venting grievances along with tribal and ethnic sentiments.

### Media training and skills development is crucial

The nascent media landscape in South Sudan requires significant investments to build the capacity of South Sudanese, especially the youth. Traditional media training is offered at the country's major university, the University of Juba. Other universities such as the Catholic University of East Africa, Kampala University, and Upper Nile University also offer diploma and certificate courses in journalism and mass communication. But the curriculum offered by these universities can barely prepare students to be fully equipped with the practical and relevant skills and knowledge that a 21st-century journalist requires. That is why organizations such as the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS) started the Media Training Institute mandated to offer practical journalism skills to students who are pursuing journalism courses at other universities. Similarly, South Sudan Youth Media Initiative also offers specialized digital and mobile journalism training to media students at various universities in the country. International media organizations such as BBC's Media Action and VOA's South Sudan in Focus programs also provide media training and skills development support to journalists in South Sudan.

### Is the media regulatory framework progressive?

Over the years, a progressive legal framework has been achieved through various policy reforms. For instance, the Media Authority Act (2013), the Broadcasting Corporation Act (2013), and the Right of Access to Information Act (2014) provide a modicum of opportunities for the promotion of press freedom and

access to information. These legislative frameworks however are a stark contrast to the Penal Code Act (2008) which limits space for the free operation of media and criminalizes defamation and libel cases. Despite the existence of these progressive laws, there are overlaps and gaps with other existing stringent laws provided within the National Security Act which give the National Security Services mandates that violate media freedom and the freedom of expression.

### International NGOs and development partners are critical for the survival of the media

In South Sudan, NGOs are the lifeline of all forms of media organizations. For-profit media outlets, such as radio stations rely on adverts, talk shows, and announcements from NGOs as their major revenue streams. Some NGOs in South Sudan provide institutional support including paying salaries and investing in capital infrastructure for many media organizations. Foreign embassies and development partners such as USAID, GiZ, Swedish, and Norwegian aid organizations have also made immense contributions to support media development and training in South Sudan. For instance, Internews's work in South Sudan is funded by USAID through the i-STREAM project (Strengthening Free and Independent Media in South Sudan). Internews South Sudan also receives funding from the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF), the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), World Vision through UKAid's Disaster Emergency Preparedness Program (DEPP), and the US State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (BPRM). It is imperative to note that the over-reliance of media organizations in South Sudan on international NGO funds significantly thwarts their sustainability. For instance, Gurtong, a oncepopular website and non-profit media organization employing over 100 media practitioners across the country was closed down in 2021 when funding to the organization dwindled.

## What then can be done to improve the media landscape in South Sudan?

Media training is crucial: The relevance of investing in training the next generation of media practitioners cannot be overstated. The work of organizations such as AMDISS through their Media Training Institute must be supported. Whilst AMDISS only offers one-year certificate courses which are not certified by the Ministry of Higher Education, attempts must be made to recognize AMDISS' training institute as a vocational training center certified and supported by the relevant government authorities.

Mobile journalism is important: Because the face and practice of the 21st-century journalism keep changing, so should the training, especially those targeting young

journalists. Thus organizations like the South Sudan Youth Media Initiative which is prioritizing training media students in mobile journalism (Mojo) should be supported.

Tackling hate speech and fake news is paramount: The outbreaks of conflicts in both 2013 and 2016 are largely attributed to the proliferation of fake news online. Attempts must therefore be made to sensitize the public and political actors on the dangers of hate speech and fake news. Media practitioners and political and civil society leaders must also be trained in fact-checking so that they can identify, analyze and counter fake news and hate speech when they arise.

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