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Public Support for Local and Community Media in Three Countries: A Comparative Study

Franz Krüger[a,b]

[a]Department of Journalism, Media and Communications, NLA Høgskolen, Kristiansand, Norway; [b]Wits Centre for Journalism, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

In the discussion of possible solutions to the business crisis facing legacy media, insufficient attention has been paid to existing arrangements that channel public money to media serving marginalised audiences, particularly in Global South countries. Argentina and South Africa are upper middle-income, often turbulent countries that have set up official mechanisms to help fund local and community media. They are here compared with Norway, where such mechanisms are a key, long-standing element in a media system that is often held up as the gold standard of public communication. Three main mechanisms are compared: indirect subsidy, direct subsidy and government advertising. Differences in political and media history and landscape have led to variations in the relative importance of the various mechanisms, the media platforms targeted and the institutional arrangements. It is argued that arrangements for public support must be understood and designed in context, are always politically driven, must be safeguarded against political interference, and should be long-term and redistributive in approach.

KEYWORDS

sustainability; local media; community media; official advertising; direct subsidy; indirect subsidy

Introduction

The economic base of media systems around the world has been significantly destabilised as traditional media, particularly newspapers, lose their audiences and revenue streams to web-based services that are free to users. The trend has led to widespread closures and job losses and to rising concern about journalism itself. McChesney writes: “[W]orldwide journalism is in a deep structural crisis. I will even go so far as to say it is in a death spiral” (2016, 129). The search for solutions has led to extensive discussion and experimentation around the world. Schiffrin uses a four-way taxonomy of possible interventions: more funding, including philanthropic funding; new business models; taxing the tech platforms; and public subsidies (2022). The role of public money has attracted particular attention. Governments have always played a major role in media economies, though

CONTACT Franz Krüger franz.kruger@wits.ac.za

not always a positive one, and there is substantial precedent for public funding of media. Examples include subsidised newspaper distribution by post in the US, tax concessions in Europe and the licence fees that have long sustained public broadcasters like the BBC (Murschetz 2013, 16).

Insufficiently considered, however, is another cluster of examples that may offer lessons for the effective design of public support. In many countries, specific audiences have been seen as having insufficient access to media and governments have responded by creating mechanisms of support. These may be indigenous minority groups like Aboriginal Australians, the Sámi of northern Scandinavia or Native Americans in the US and Canada. New Zealand is typical, where the organisation New Zealand on Air distributes official funding to the media of Maori and other minority groups (Mollgaard 2018, 6). Similarly, many jurisdictions recognise local audiences as having informational needs that established market players are unable to meet fully. France is among the European countries that has since the 1940s operated an extensive system aimed to support local and community media (Lardeau 2020, 238).

Though local audiences in a country like France and the First Nations of wealthy former colonies are very different, they share the circumstance that a relative marginalisation from mainstream media has led to public policy decisions for official support of targeted media. Even less visible in the literature are experiences from Global South countries, where community media sustainability has long been a matter of concern for international donors and others. In Murschetz's important book on state support for media, still the most comprehensive treatment of the subject, case studies come from Europe, Australia, the US and Russia, but nowhere else (2013). The focus on Global North countries has led to important experiences, factors and insights from elsewhere being missed.

This article aims to fill the gap by considering some experiences of public support for local and community media in two Global South countries, Argentina and South Africa, comparing them to Norway as a strong exemplar of the Nordic media model. It thereby responds to the call to decolonise communication studies (Mano and Milton 2021; Wasserman 2020a), with the combination of countries allowing for similarities and differences between Global North and Global South systems and experiences to be highlighted. At the same time, the perspective remains one from the Global South, with a central concern with lessons of relevance for countries still marked by histories of coloniality. The arrangements will be analysed against the background of political, economic and historical features of the various media systems, and I will draw out some implications for moves to extend the use of public money to support journalistic media. Much of the concrete information is already available, and the discussion accordingly draws on secondary and primary texts, supplemented by interviews with key role-players in the different countries.[1] The original contribution being offered here is not so much in the by way of primary research, but rather consists of a comparison between the three examples which will surface significant new perspectives.

I will use the terms "local and community media" to refer to non-corporate media that operate at sub-national and non-metropolitan levels. The terms cover a range of different forms, for which labels like alternative, third sector, development, proximity, indigenous

[1]The University of the Witwatersrand's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) granted approval for the research under the protocol number H21/08/13.

media and others have been used. They include both non-profit and small commercial entities, and may operate on any platform, though print and radio remain most important. At the same time the qualifier "non-corporate" serves to exclude those chains of local titles run for profit by large companies (Duncan 2015, 425). Though there is an extensive definitional discussion in sections of the literature (among others, see Atton 2002, 2015; Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2007; Couldry and Curran 2003; Gulyás and Baines 2020), my view is that the range of forms is so diverse as to make rigid categorisation impossible. Local and community media face particular sustainability challenges, as highlighted in Abernathy's focus on expanding "news deserts" in the US (2018; see also Cairncross 2019; Dugmore 2021).

One assumption needs to be made explicit. I proceed from the basis that government involvement in media economies is inescapable, but needs to be subject to democratic scrutiny and control. It is trite to point out that official financial support often comes with strings attached. The danger of media capture, in Schiffrin's phrase (2018, 1033), is all too real, but it is clearly incorrect to assume that commercial income is somehow neutral. As Ots and Picard point out, "[A]ll resources, whether acquired from the state or from the market will to some degree shape the behaviour of news organizations" (2018, 7). The debate about public money supporting media is often reduced to an ultimately sterile ideological struggle between proponents of free market economics and those taking a critical political economy position. I argue that acceptance of the state's involvement in commercialised media markets—as all three under consideration are—lays the basis for the consideration of mechanisms that can manage that involvement and minimise dangers of capture. In this article, my aim is to understand the shape of systems of public support in three very different national contexts and how they may impact on effective, independent public service media provision at local level.

Three countries, three systems

Mechanisms of public support for media need to be understood in the context of particular national media systems, as Ots and Picard argue (2018, 5). The countries chosen for this study fall into different categories of the well-known Hallin and Mancini system (2004) Norway clearly falls in the Nordic "democratic corporatist" category. Argentina, with other Latin American media systems, has been described as closest to the "liberal" type; Guerrero adds the important rider that the system is captured by commercial and political elites (2014). South Africa has attracted comparatively little attention in the media systems tradition of scholarship, though Hadland has placed it, with some reservations, in the "polarized pluralist" model (2007).

The examples were chosen on the basis that they show some similarities in policy approach, while obvious differences allow discussion of the ways in which context shapes arrangements for public support of local and community media. Two countries in the Global South will be compared to one of the wealthiest countries of the Global North, one that is often held up as a benchmark for healthy media systems. Argentina and South Africa are leading economies in Latin America and Africa, respectively, each with distinct media systems and traditions. Both are middle-income, often turbulent countries that have instituted mechanisms for media support. In Norway, public support for the media is a key and long-standing element of a strong media system.

Despite differences, all three have strong commercial media sectors. Comparing them will add nuance to the contextual understanding of systems of public support for media. Sometimes, useful insights can be gained from comparisons precisely when differences are great.

A brief sketch of some key characteristics of the various media systems will provide a necessary backdrop to the discussion of mechanisms for public support of the media. Space does not allow a detailed comparative analysis of the political economies of the three media systems, though it would offer rich rewards. The focus will be on some general characteristics necessary to understand the state's approach to media support.

Norway is one of the world's wealthiest countries, with a strong reputation for media freedom and trust in the media (Newman 2023, 89). Of particular interest for my study is the centrality of local media. The country has few newspapers addressed at the national elite, but has a "virtual forest of local newspapers" (Skogerbø 1997, 100), an emphasis which has strengthened over the years. As highlighted by Hallin and Mancini (2004) and many writers since, the Norwegian media system exhibits strong involvement by the state. Policies have been formulated "within the framework of the welfare state", which is seen as having an obligation to ensure reasonable provision of information to citizens (Kammer 2016; Skogerbø and Karlsen 2020, 98). The public broadcaster, the NRK, is funded heavily by the state and maintains a central position in the media landscape. At the same time, an extensive system of subsidy has played an important role in maintaining media diversity. The system was originally set up in 1969 after a spate of local newspaper closures caused concern that audiences in smaller towns were losing access to the full range of political views. Political parallelism was strong, with newspapers tending to be aligned closely with particular parties. As a result, all parties had an interest in ensuring the survival of so-called second newspapers—those under threat from a dominant rival in smaller markets—as all had newspapers that stood to benefit. Despite some criticism that the scheme undermines competition and media freedom, "the close relationship between the press and the political parties is one of the main reasons why it was possible to muster widespread support in favour of a system" (Skogerbø 1997, 102). Thus, a strong political parallelism was built into the origins of the Norwegian media support system, though it has weakened somewhat since (Ohlsson 2015, 12). Over the years, increasing emphasis has been placed on support for media of ethnic and other minorities, particularly the Sámi, the traditionally reindeer-herding people of the Arctic (Rasmussen, Sara, and Krøvel 2021).

Turning to the second country of interest, Argentina is classed as an upper-middle income country and has the third largest media market in Latin America (PWC 2014). Private commercial media dominate the landscape to a much greater extent than in either Norway or South Africa, with a particularly weak public sector (Newman 2022, 114). Ownership is highly concentrated in the hands of a small number of conglomerates, and mainstream outlets are overwhelmingly based in the capital, Buenos Aires, and other major cities (RSF 2018). The country has a good media freedom reputation, placing 40th in the Reporters Without Borders index for 2023, one of the highest in Latin America (2023). As in other parts of the region, the state has a complex relationship with the media. Guerrero identifies the close relationship between political and media elites as a key characteristic of his "captured liberal" model (2014). The relationship has led to clientelism, poor regulatory efficiency, high interference in the media and a particular form of market reforms (Guerrero 2014, 59). Discussing the case of Argentina, Liotti (2014) traces the relationship through three phases, starting with the period of dictatorship, marked by tight and direct control of the media, with a second phase, most closely associated with the Menem presidency, marked by aggressive liberalisation that benefited the large media conglomerates. Since the early 2000s, populist governments under the presidencies of Néstor and Cristina de Fernandez Kirchner were increasingly alienated from the mainstream media, leading to strong political polarisation (Liotti 2014, 107).

A key measure was the passing of the Audiovisual Communications Services Act of 2009, which sought to limit the power of major conglomerates and for the first time made room for non-profit, community media (Segura et al. 2019, 79). After the end of dictatorship, a significant movement of peasant, alternative and grassroots media had grown up in response to the power of media conglomerates and their urban, middle-class bias. However, the alternative media operated outside the law (Linares 2022, 5). The new law, pushed through by the populist Kirchner government which was itself alienated from the big media, recognised the non-profit sector, reserved frequency space for community broadcasters and set up mechanisms for support. Though implementation was slow and contested, many existing outlets gained legal recognition while many new media were established (Kitzberger and Schuliaquer 2021, 5–8). The law helped "disarm the uniformity of the local audiovisual industry", writes Halpern (Segura et al. 2021, 4). It is clear that change, in the form of the 2009 law, came at the point where the ruling elite was disenchanted with the mainstream media.

The third country of interest, South Africa, is the wealthiest in Africa and joins Argentina in the upper middle income category (World Bank 2021). However, the average figures obscure enormous differences between rich and poor, as shown by the country's Gini coefficient of 63%—the highest in the world (World Bank 2014). It has the largest media market in Africa (PWC 2019, 7). The country has a good media freedom reputation, sitting in 25th place in the Reporters Without Borders index for 2023, one of the highest in Africa (2023). The relationship between state and media has gone through distinct phases. Like Argentina under dictatorship, the apartheid state exercised extensive control over the media, through repressive laws and a monopoly in broadcasting (Hachten and Giffard 1984). The coming of democracy in the early 1990s brought massive changes to the media landscape: constitutional guarantees for media freedom, the end of the state monopoly of broadcasting and diversification in the ownership of print (Jacobs 2002, 280). After a honeymoon period, the relationship between the democratic government and the mainstream media soured as a result of a series of crises, including the controversy about the official failure to deal appropriately with the AIDS crisis and a series of corruption scandals (Simelela and Venter 2014; Wasserman 2020b, 461–462).

The early drive to open communicative space included an emphasis on community radio. A strong tradition of grassroots media had grown up in opposition to apartheid, and the new democratic order prioritised the creation of a legal and regulatory framework to open the airwaves to community voices, as well as mechanisms for practical support. Whereas reforms in Argentina regularised a sector that had grown in illegality or, at best, a legal grey zone, South Africa's community broadcasting sector hardly existed before the new order. By 2019, a national survey found that 200 community radio stations were on air (Krüger 2019). However, the framework has come under extensive criticism for failing to tackle the dominance of commercial media. "In … leaving the fundamental media structures intact, [the government risks] creating islands of public service prog[r]amming in a sea of commercialisation [where] commercial services tend to crowd out public services", writes Duncan (2003, 10; see also Chiumbu 2017).

Official statements continue to express strong backing for community media, emphasising an obligation to support marginalised groups. However, the rhetoric needs to be seen also against the shifting political context. As the government has come under increasingly sharp criticism from mainstream media, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has seen community media (as well as the public broadcaster) as a way of addressing the wider population more directly. Pillay describes how elements in the government saw community media "as primarily a conduit for government information" in a situation of perceived hostility by mainstream media (2003, 414). Where Argentina's community media come out of a tradition of strong opposition to the government, South Africa's community media is often seen as taking a much more sympathetic position, due to historical reasons as well as the extent of official support.

Mechanisms of public support

Different mechanisms of public support for media of all kinds are available. Deane has developed a useful five-fold typology, which I follow here: indirect subsidy, such as tax relief; direct government subsidy; subsidy directly from the public, such as licence fees; "flexible or transactional support"—primarily government advertising; and donor support from public resources, in other words media development support from foreign governments (2021, 12). Not all of the mechanisms play a role in each of the three countries, with the more important mechanisms emerging as indirect subsidy (in Norway), direct subsidy (in all three countries) and official advertising (in Argentina and South Africa). The focus will be on these three mechanisms. The differing ways in which the various available mechanisms are (and are not) deployed in the three countries can be linked directly to context, as the following analysis will show.

Indirect subsidy

Indirect subsidy refers to concessions offered to media organisations, most commonly through a reduction in value-added tax (VAT). Such schemes are common in Europe, but there has been debate about their usefulness. It is argued that tax systems are distorted as a result (Murschetz 2013, 25), but Ots and Picard point out that measures which apply equally across the board leave fundamental market characteristics intact (2018). On the other hand, Živković cites experience in the Balkans to argue that media owners can misuse indirect support to bolster profits rather than invest the money in journalism (Živković 2016, 5).

In Norway, indirect subsidy is the most significant support offered to media, who are completely exempted from the standard VAT rate of 25%—one of the most generous schemes even in Europe. The overall value of the exemption reached NOK2.5 billion in 2021 (around US$230 million) (Medietilsynet 2021, 25) and was worth five times the direct subsidy scheme in 2009 (Ohlsson 2015, 28). The scheme was initially created for print media in 1970, but was extended to journalistic media on all platforms in 2016. In contrast to direct subsidy, VAT exemption mainly benefits the large publishers, with half the benefit going to the 10 largest newspapers (Ohlsson 2015, 28). However, there is no indication that the Norwegian system is abused by proprietors.

Wealthy Norway has the fiscal room to allow such largesse, while high levels of confidence in both government and the media provide the political space to allow continuation of the scheme. Significantly, similar schemes in other Nordic and European countries have come under pressure. Sweden removed its zero-rating in 1995 and Finland did so in 2012, replacing it with a smaller VAT concession for the print media. Though the issue has been raised by conservative administrations in Norway, too, the country so far retains the total exemption (Ohlsson 2015, 29).

Both Argentina and South Africa are more polarised and face much more acute budgetary pressures, and indirect subsidy in both countries is insignificant. In response to the economic crisis of 2001, the government of Argentina subsidised public utilities like electricity to make them more affordable. Though not specifically targeted at community media, they did benefit until the measure was ended by the conservative administration of President Mauricio Macri in 2015 (Binder, Fisher, and Godinez Galay 2017, 200). In South Africa, the Independent Communications Authority of SA (Icasa), the licensing authority, charges community broadcasters preferential rates for licence applications (Icasa 2022). In addition, the state signal distribution company Sentech charges community radio stations a rate that is 30% lower than for other broadcasters (K. Thage, pers. comm., 7 April 2022). According to Sentech, the value of the discount for community broadcasters had reached R17.5 million (around USD900 000) in 2021 (Leshope 2021). Nevertheless, radio stations have built up a substantial debt as they struggle to pay and feel other arms of the state should pick up the cost (Interview informant 6).

Direct government funding

Government agencies offering direct grant funding to media outlets represent one of the most visible available mechanisms for public subsidy. They exist in many countries, from the long-established US Commission for Public Broadcasting to newer initiatives in countries like Morocco (Zaarour 2022). In contrast to indirect subsidy, direct funding has an element of selectivity built in, which means the money can more easily be targeted at sectors deserving of support and are less likely to simply benefit incumbents. At the same time, direct funding can be vulnerable to abuse (Ots and Picard 2018, 4). Three aspects of media funds can be identified as important: the organisational architecture and positioning; the approach to the distribution of funds; and the specific source of funding.

Of the three countries of interest, Norway's system is far and away the oldest, having been set up in the late 1960s. The scheme is administered by the *Medietilsynet*, the Media Authority, which also applies other media-related policies, such as film age limits and local broadcast licences. Funding comes directly through the national budget, and its disbursement reached around NOK 450 million in 2020/2021 (around USD42.5 million) (Medietilsynet 2021, 26). Several schemes are in operation, with the largest share of funding still taking the form of production subsidies for newspapers in smaller markets and to "alternatives to the leading newspapers in larger markets" (Medietilsynet 2021, 156). Smaller schemes support Sámi media, distribution of newspapers in the sparsely populated Arctic North and innovation (Medietilsynet 2021, 26 and 265).

In Argentina, the landmark 2009 Audiovisual Communications Act that sought to reshape the media landscape included provision for the *Fondo de Fomento Concursable para Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual* (Fomeca), the Competitive Development Fund for Audiovisual Communication. The fund operates under the National Communications Entity (Enacom), which oversees and licenses all communication services. Establishment of the fund was slow. It took until 2013 for the fund to be set up, and then the conservative Macri government, elected in 2015, attempted to roll back several aspects of the media reforms of the 2009 law, including imposing a freeze on Fomeca funding, ostensibly for purposes of auditing. Since then, the fund has shown strong growth, with official figures showing steep increases after the 2016 freeze in both the number of projects supported and money disbursed. For the 2020 financial year, Fomeca paid out a record AR$171.6 million (around USD1.2 million) for 270 projects. In total, Fomeca had disbursed a total of almost AR$1billion (around USD6.3 million) by May 2022 (interview informant 5).

The South African fund for community media is the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA), established by act of parliament in 2002 as part of a wide-ranging initiative to reshape the media landscape and bring community voices into the national debate. The MDDA is an independent public entity, with a board appointed through a parliamentary process, though it reports administratively to the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS).

The agency has been subjected to extensive criticism, further discussed below, and Pillay has described how the structure was the fruit of compromise between government, civil society and the media industry, affecting funding and mandate (2003). The initial concept would have given the agency some regulatory powers to intervene in the media to ensure greater diversity (such as breaking up cartels), while financing was to be via a levy on the media industry (Pillay 2003, 409). Both aspects were significantly weakened and the agency's function is largely reduced to the funding of small media, in a direct indicator of what several critics have called a failure to address the fundamentally commercial nature of the media landscape (Bosch 2022; Chiumbu 2017; Duncan 2003, 2011).

Several important differences among the three schemes can be noted. Institutionally, the funds occupy different positions in relation to the state. Norway's Medietilsynet is a media regulator based inside government, in the Culture Ministry, while Argentina's Fomeca is an arm of the independent telecommunications regulator. South Africa's MDDA has the clearest formal independence, as it is established by its own law as a completely independent entity. The comparison illustrates that formal institutional positioning, though important, is not the last word in ensuring actual independence. The Norwegian body is integrated into government, but there are no serious questions about its ability to keep political influences at bay. The South African body, on the other hand, has faced concerns that it is not always politically neutral, as evidenced for instance by the prominent involvement of government ministers in opening studios funded by the MDDA (GCIS 2022).

In terms of the approach to disbursement, the Norwegian system is set up for long-term support of media, and eligibility criteria minimise discretion. Though short-term project support is also available, the largest funding is for production subsidies which are automatically provided as long as a publication meets basic criteria. These include that the publication's main purpose must be the dissemination of news, information and public discussion, rather than advertising and marketing; that it must be led by an editor; and that it must be of general interest (though support has more recently been extended to niche publications) (Forskrift om produksjonstilskudd til nyhets—og aktualitetsmedier 2014, para. 3). Significantly, in the light of concerns that subsidies should not unduly profit owners, allowable profits are capped at 10%. If publishers' profits rise above that level, subsidies are stopped and may have to be paid back (Forskrift om produksjonstilskudd til nyhets—og aktualitetsmedier 2014, para. 6).

In both Argentina and South Africa, funding is made available for specific projects over a limited timeframe. Fomeca does not cover basic running expenses, inviting applications from time to time along several "lines": content and programmes; training; equipment and building alterations; and management support (Interview informant 5). There are also lines aimed specifically at indigenous broadcasters. Final decisions are made by an external jury constituted for the purpose (Linares 2022, 26).

South Africa's MDDA makes funding available on the basis of project applications that are invited once a year. Grants may cover running costs, capital equipment or other purposes. The agency has also helped reduce broadcasters' debt with the signal distributor Sentech (Interview informant 4). The approach is based on a view that the agency's role is to help community media achieve sustainability in a fundamentally commercial landscape. Sustainability is seen as the capacity to keep operating without outside support, as outlined in the recent publication of a a "model" of sustainability (MDDA 2023).

Significant differences also emerge in the platforms targeted, reflecting differences in the relative importance of broadcast and print in local news provision. In Norway, support for local broadcasting was introduced only in 2001, and it receives just 5% of the overall disbursement (Medietilsynet 2021, 26 and 265). In Argentina, Fomeca funding is available for community and indigenous television and radio broadcasters, as well as for independent producers without broadcast licences, a provision that allows operations still struggling to get full legal recognition to benefit (Segura et al. 2021, 38). Print and online media are not covered.

South Africa's MDDA supports both community broadcast and independent community print projects, but the biggest share by far goes to community radio. In the year 2020/2021, around R4.7 million (around USD257 000) went to print compared to R41.4 million (around USD2.3 million) to broadcast (Potye 2022). The Association of Independent Publishers (AIP) has been vocal in its unhappiness with the low levels of support (Skinner and Dhlomo 2022). The difference arises because most of the agency's income comes from commercial broadcasters and is therefore earmarked for broadcast.

The strong emphasis on radio in Argentina and South Africa reflects the relative importance of the medium in reaching poorer social groups in Global South countries. Low costs of production and consumption, the ease with which different languages can be used and other factors give the medium disproportionate importance in reaching poorer communities (Krüger 2012, 11–13). Writing in the South African context, Chiumbu and Motsaathebe argue that "the print media and television mostly serve elite interests and audiences", while radio serves marginalised communities (2021, 1).

In terms of income, Norway's Medietilsynet is funded by direct budgetary allocation, while more complex arrangements in South Africa and Argentina reflect both the need to contain pressure on national budgets and the need to insulate institutions of this kind from possible political pressure.

Broadcast licensees in South Africa are obliged by law to contribute 0.2% of their annual turnover either to the universal service agency or to the MDDA, and contribute around two-thirds of the latter's budget of around R104 m (2020/2021 figures—around USD5.7 million)—what can be described as a semi-voluntary levy. Government funding —much lower than initially envisaged—makes up the balance (Potye 2022). Newspaper publishers committed to a voluntary contribution when the agency was established, but have since ended the arrangement because of challenging business conditions (MMA 2017, 42).

The Argentine law provides for Fomeca to be financed at a fixed rate of 10% of levies and fines from commercial operators that flow to Enacom (Binder, Fisher, and Godinez Galay 2017, 172). The arrangement is thus directly redistributive, shifting money from the commercial to the non-profit sector, and also means the fund does not have to compete against other public funding priorities in regular budgeting cycles.

Assessment of the systems by their beneficiaries vary. Norway's Local Newspaper Association is happy with the Norwegian system, particularly since criteria were broadened to benefit even smaller publications. Informant 1 said: "We are very satisfied [with] how it works, but our job particularly has been to let the smallest papers [benefit]. They weren't a part of that system before" (Interview informant 1).

With improvements in Fomeca's functioning, community media practitioners regard the fund's impact as positive. According to informant 2, an official in an Argentine grouping of community radios, the fund is now working well, and is now "the main source" of resources for community media in Argentina (Interview informant 2). And Radio Ahijuna, broadcasting in Quilmes, told researchers Fomeca support had provided equipment and enabled them to start a news service (quoted in Binder, Fisher, and Godinez Galay 2017, 144).

Assessments of the MDDA's impact are more mixed. The National Community Radio Forum (NCRF) believes improved stability at the agency has created "better systems of ensuring that money gets to the intended beneficiaries" (Interview informant 6). And a review commissioned by the agency itself points out that many projects would not have been able to develop without MDDA money (MMA 2017, 81). However, organisational instability and budget constraints have reduced its impact, the review says (MMA 2017, 81). Others go further. Bosch writes that the MDDA "has had a very limited impact on the growth and development of the community media sector; and by implication, hardly any impact on media development and diversity in South Africa, despite their original mandate" (2022, 121). In addition, concerns have been raised about an overly close relationship with the government and ruling party, as well as a failure to address fundamental structural issues, as noted above.

Government advertising

The primary aim of government advertising is to communicate with citizens, but the impact on media economies cannot be ignored. Mainstream literature on the media business crisis has paid hardly any attention to official communication budgets: Murschetz lists only two mechanisms of government support, direct and indirect funding (2013, 22). In Global South countries, particularly, government advertising is a major factor, and may amount to an estimated 85–90% of media income, to use Rwanda as a particularly stark example (Ogola 2017). The dangers are obvious. A Mexican report makes the point: "[T]he allocation of government advertising is the more common tool to exercise soft censorship" (WAN-IFRA 2014, 6).

In Norway, government advertising does not play a significant role in financing media. With Norwegian society being strongly digital, official policy prioritises the use of digital channels to communicate with citizens (Norway 2009, sec. 3.3). Some local municipalities still advertise in traditional media, but "it's been less and less because communities use their website and think that is enough", according to the Local Newspaper Association (Interview informant 1).

In Argentina, however, official advertising is a major factor, both economically and politically. The amounts are substantial: according to the community broadcasters' group Farco, the national government accounts for around 10% of the country's overall advertising market. Additional amounts are spent by other levels of government and official entities (Interview informant 2, 2021). Spending has been strongly skewed towards media conglomerates operating in metropolitan areas, and adspend is often deployed for political ends, as Becerra and Mastrini argue (2014, 64).

In response to the historically close relationship between the political elite and big media, some parts of the alternative media continue to reject any official money, whether though Fomeca or through official advertising. La Colectiva Radio in Buenos Aires say it takes "no official advertising, no large corporations or multinationals, no industries that violate labor rights, environmental rights, etc. Anything that goes against what we think is not acceptable" (quoted in Binder, Fisher, and Godinez Galay 2017, 146).

But increasingly, a more pragmatic approach is being taken, and most projects regard the state as having an obligation to support community media (Fisher 2019, 89). Furthermore, attempts are being made to make the allocation of official advertising fair and transparent, and for it to benefit small media, particularly outside the metropolitan areas. Though poorly enforced, official guidelines set out that advertising must be allocated on the basis of four considerations: size of audience; relevance to the particular message; geographic area; and promotion of federalism and plurality (Marino and Espada 2019). Attempts have been made to introduce a comprehensive legal framework, but have so far not succeeded, though some local jurisdictions like the capital city of Buenos Aires operate schemes to distribute advertising to neighbourhood media (Binder, Fisher, and Godinez Galay 2017, 145). In 2021, a range of community media groups came together to launch a campaign calling for measures to "democratize and federalize official advertising". The campaign argues that the government cannot use commercial logic in planning its communications. Demands include that all official advertising should be managed by the official news agency Telam; that a third of all advertising should be reserved for non-profit media; that no single company should get more than 3% of all official adspend and that a public listing of all advertising contracts be maintained (Farco 2021).

In South Africa, official spending is similarly important for local and community media, but the discussion about the possibilities of misuse is much less developed. Government policy is that 30% of official advertising should go to community media, but there are no mechanisms to ensure that the target is met (MMA 2017, 39). Communication budgets are decentralised and central government has not wanted to impose regulations, according to an official (Interview informant 4). The central GCIS, which runs some campaigns on request from specific entities, says an attempt is made to include community media, though the lack of reliable audience figures is often an obstacle (Interview informant 3 interview). Figures for how much money actually goes to local and community media in South Africa do not seem to be available. Difficulties include not only the widely dispersed budgets, but also the fact that money is spent on activities far beyond standard advertising campaigns. The annual report of the GCIS mentions activations at taxi ranks, sponsored talkshows, open days and paid-for broadcasts of important speeches —all of which bring funds into community radio (2021, 56). Community media themselves feel that the state has an obligation to do more. The NCRF argues that community radio has around 25% of the overall radio audience, and wants to know why this is not matched by the share of adspend (Interview informant 6).

Concluding discussion

What, then, emerges from the comparison of mechanisms of public support for local and community media in Norway, Argentina and South Africa? Taking as a starting point a Global South perspective, this article has been able to show important points of comparison and some gaps in the literature that assumes the Global North experience is the norm. Political dynamics played a key role in the creation of media support in all three countries, including in Norway. In all cases, the arrangements were initiated in response to concern by political players that issues in the media were hindering their access to citizens. Though the rhetoric is inevitably about citizens' rights, it is clear that political players' self-interest in reaching voters is an important factor, whether countries are in the Global North or the Global South. As described above, a spate of newspaper closures in the late 1960s led to a Norwegian cross-party consensus around the need to support "second newspapers" in smaller media markets, to ensure citizens had access to the view of the parties the newspapers were linked to. In both Argentina and South Africa, political change brought into power groups that felt disadvantaged by mainstream media. The dynamic is particularly clear in South Africa, where the ANC of Nelson Mandela regarded the mainstream media as complicit in apartheid. In Argentina, a populist government concerned about the power of corporate media initiated the 2009 media reforms.

At the same time, differences in media and political histories have shaped the attitudes by local and community media to the state in the three countries. In Norway, the state is widely respected as a disinterested supporter of local media. As discussed, South African community media are seen as being strongly sympathetic to the post-apartheid state, a major source of support, while in Argentina, attitudes are more critical, though they are softening (Informants 1, 2 and 6 interviews).

All three examples show how arrangements are subject to dynamism and change. The regular reviews of the Norwegian system have ensured ongoing adaptation to changes in the media landscape. At the end of 2021, the *Medietilsynet* published the latest review, a massively detailed analysis of the changing media landscape that ran to 346 pages (2021). As discussed, Argentina's Fomeca went through some difficult years, but is now earning respect from the sector it serves. The MDDA has struggled with governance and other challenges over several years that have undermined its effectiveness and credibility.

This investigation sought to understand how contextual factors have shaped the mechanisms in use, and it is clear, unsurprisingly, that the difference in wealth between Norway and the other two is a key factor. At the most obvious level, the Oslo government is able to allocate far more resources to media than the other two countries, particularly through the extensive VAT exemption scheme. At the same time, the strength of the commercial media economy in Norway makes the state's role less important in relative terms, reducing the power attached. As in other sectors of the economy, the disproportionate size of the state in poorer countries has important implications for power, dependencies and the risk of media capture. The Global South perspective has also highlighted the simple fact that the state, through various agencies and mechanisms, is relatively much more important as an economic actor than in wealthier countries. Government advertising emerges as a major factor in the media economies of Argentina and South Africa, whereas it is of negligible importance in Norway, highlighting an important gap in scholarship and a need to pay much more attention to the issue. Differences in the relative importance of media platforms and mechanisms of support also emerge.

Stability and levels of trust in media and in government are other important factors. The Norwegian *Medietilsynet* comfortably exists as an arm of government without serious questions about its independence. More elaborate arrangements in the other two countries are necessary because of the more politically charged atmosphere, and even they are not always sufficient to ensure credibility. At the same time, a strong critical tradition among alternative media in Argentina has shaped responses to government initiatives.

But besides highlighting some commonalities and differences, the comparison draws attention to a few points that policymakers elsewhere should take into account, particularly in Global South contexts. For one thing, the question of insulating mechanisms against political capture is evidently crucial. Institutions providing direct support must be independent, and the examples show that formal positioning, though important, is only one factor. Real independence has to be consistently demonstrated to beneficiaries and the wider public. In addition, deliberate strategies need to be developed to minimise the risk of government advertising being misused for capture or influence-peddling.

An important difference lies in the philosophy underlying measures to support media. Whereas the Norwegian system represents a conscious long-term intervention in a media system whose economics are seen as unable to meet the public interest in reliable information, the Argentine and South African systems are more short term in nature. Policymakers need to accept the need for ongoing support, rather than aim for a model of sustainability that assumes commercial success is within reach for small, local media in a market that is heavily stacked against them. This discussion started with reference to the business crisis facing journalistic media: if large players have become vulnerable in the face of the international Internet platform giants, why should marginal actors be better off? At the same time, the fact that the Argentinian system derives its income from wealthy operators in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector, makes for a redistributive mechanism that has much to commend it.

Ultimately, the design of a system to meet the policy aim of drawing more marginal audiences into the national media system must depend on context. There are no easy universal solutions. The relative success of the strong, decentralised and trusted Norwegian system is often remarked on (among others, see Newman 2022, 92–93; Skogerbø and Karlsen 2020, 98–99), but there are clearly many other factors that have shaped these positive outcomes, and the model cannot simply be exported elsewhere. For policymakers seeking to strengthen arrangements of support in other jurisdictions, a thorough understanding of their own context is essential as a starting point. Examples from elsewhere can then be explored for their applicability.

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Interviews

Informant 1, Norwegian local newspaper association, 28 April 2022, in person, Oslo.
Informant 2, Argentine community radio association, 3 and 20 May 2022, by email.
Informant 3, South African government communications official, 2 June 2022, on Microsoft Teams.
Informant 4, Media Development and Diversity Agency, South Africa, 4 May 2022, on Zoom.
Informant 5, Fomeca official, Argentina, 7 July 2022, by email.
Informant 6, South African community radio association, 4 April 2022, on Zoom.