

## RESEARCH REPORTS

# A Framework for Promoting Diverse Visual Media Content in The Maldives

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**ABSTRACT** *The creation of visually diverse media content is significant in the context of Maldivian media landscape. This research aims to explore how it is possible to enhance the representation of Maldivian narratives and the connection to the local audience in the media content. Previous studies have found cultural and linguistic diversity, gender equality in newsrooms and the audiences' interest in local news (Friedland et al., 2012) but there is a research gap that presents a framework for implementing these objectives. The need to develop a sustainable and open media environment for citizen journalists and creatives to produce meaningful and socially relevant content is the motivation for this research. To address the research questions of this study, data was collected using a mixed method through surveys to understand public opinion and the current state of media in the Maldives. The results indicate that local content is highly valued and that financial assistance for media practitioners is needed. Moreover, the research suggests the need to monitor and assess the quality of content, willingness to pay for quality content, ensure media freedom, and engage with the vulnerable groups. The implication of these findings also support the idea that the media industry has to embrace disability as an investment on the future workforce and active audience to gain its credibility.*

*Keywords: Media Pluralism, Subscription, Media, Media Independence*

## Introduction

The media landscape of the Maldives, characterized by its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, presents a multifaceted array of challenges and opportunities for media practitioners. Despite an increasing demand for locally produced content, a notable disparity persists in the representation of the diverse narratives that constitute the Maldivian experience. This paper aims to address this critical gap by proposing a comprehensive framework designed to promote the development and dissemination of diverse visual media content within the Maldives. Through this framework, the study seeks to contribute to a more inclusive and representative media environment that accurately reflects the intricate tapestry of Maldivian society.

The Maldives currently has a total of 37 registered broadcast media outlets, of which 11 are operated by Public Service Media (PSM), encompassing seven television channels and four radio stations. According to the European Union, Election Observation Mission, MALDIVES, 2023, Final Report. Although comprehensive audience data is lacking, there are 31 television channels in operation, with private TV stations and the state-run PSM News being the most widely followed. PSM also functions as the official state news agency of the Maldives.

In the realm of digital media, 229 online media outlets are currently registered; however, the Maldives Media Council (MMC) estimates that out of this only approximately 45 remain active. In recent years, online platforms and social media have emerged as the predominant sources of news, with Raajje TV leading in online engagement, boasting 269,000 Facebook followers, followed by PSM News with 117,000.

Traditional print media has experienced a significant decline, with Mihaaru being the sole remaining newspaper, primarily catering to older demographics. Radio broadcasting is predominantly state-controlled, with no private or community radio stations operating in the atolls. Given this gap, stakeholders have underscored the necessity of establishing community-based media platforms to enhance local news coverage and contribute to national discourse on pressing issues affecting island communities.

### **Background of the Research**

This study was conducted as part of my Return to Work Plan (RWP) at the University of Queensland, with the primary objective of collecting data to develop a framework aimed at promoting visually diverse media content within Maldivian newsrooms, particularly to support the State Media of Maldives. The insights derived from this research are intended to guide stakeholders and media organizations in implementing strategic changes to enhance the inclusivity and representation of diverse narratives within their media outlets.

An online survey was designed to assess the current state of media content and evaluate public perceptions of media practices in the Maldives. The survey was administered over a 17-day period, from June 7th to June 24th, 2022, and successfully garnered responses from 214 participants, exceeding the initial target of 200 respondents. The survey was structured into four key sections:

1. Demographics of participants,
2. Media usage frequency and trends
3. Media personal and production houses / newsrooms, and
4. Subscription based content.

The data collected provided critical insights into the roles and contributions of freelancers, citizen journalists, and content producers within the Maldivian media industry. Additionally, the survey explored perspectives on gender equality, the inclusion of employees with disabilities, linguistic diversity, and the representation of regional dialects in media content. The study also examined emerging trends such as on-demand services, subscription models, content quality, and media independence.

The RWP and the accompanying framework were developed under the guidance of Associate Professor Leo Bowman from the Journalism Discipline at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and Nelson Salangsang, Director of the International Projects Unit within the Faculty of Creative Industries, Education, and Social Justice at QUT.

To ensure the comprehensiveness and applicability of the RWP, the survey results were presented to several key stakeholders, and in-depth interviews were conducted to supplement the quantitative data with qualitative analysis. The stakeholders engaged in this process included:

- Regulatory Bodies: Maldives Broadcasting Commission, Maldives Media Council
- Parliament Members: 19th Parliament Committee on Independent Institutions
- TV Channels & Radio: Public Service Media (PSM) and Dhivehi Raajjeyge Adu Raajje FM
- Streaming Apps & Telecommunication Companies: Dhiraagu TV (Cable TV & App), Baiskoafu Streaming App
- Print/Online Newsrooms: Adhadhu Online, Dhauru (Next Media Group), Mihaaru (Dho Magazine, The Edition), Sun Media Group (Sun Online, SSNET & SSTV)
- Freelancers, Content Creators, and Citizen Journalists: Various independent content creators and production houses

### **Literature Review**

Local media content serves as a cornerstone for fostering community engagement, delivering culturally relevant news, and reinforcing collective identity. The perception of local media, particularly among underrepresented communities and in light of the growing influence of citizen journalism, has become a focal point in media studies. This literature review explores these dynamics, with a particular emphasis on accessibility and representation for underrepresented groups, the role of citizen journalists, and the transformative effects of digitalization on local media content. Additionally, it examines the interplay of trust, content quality, socio-political environments, and audience engagement in shaping perceptions of local media.

### **Underrepresented Communities in Local Media**

The inclusion and representation of underrepresented communities, such as individuals who are blind or deaf, in local media content are critical for advancing media accessibility and equity. These communities often encounter substantial barriers in accessing information, leading to exclusion and marginalization. Goggin and Newell (2003) argue that accessible media content—including closed captioning, audio descriptions, and sign language interpretation—is essential for the meaningful inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Despite this, local media frequently fails to provide such services, exacerbating the marginalization of these groups.

The portrayal of underrepresented communities in media also significantly influences their perception of local media. When the media fails to represent these communities accurately or positively, it can perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce social exclusion. Ellis and Kent (2011) highlight that media often depicts people with disabilities in negative or overly simplistic ways, which can diminish the perceived relevance and credibility of local media among these groups.

### **Citizen Journalism and Local Media**

The emergence of citizen journalism has profoundly reshaped perceptions of local media content. Unlike traditional journalists, citizen journalists typically lack formal training but contribute to local media by reporting on events and issues from their unique perspectives. Bowman and Willis (2003) describe citizen

journalism as a paradigm shift in the media landscape, transforming audiences from passive consumers into active contributors. This democratization of media facilitates the inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives, particularly from communities that have traditionally been overlooked by mainstream media.

A notable example of this integration is CNN-IBN, now CNN-News18, which has successfully incorporated citizen journalism into its mainstream media platform. This approach has facilitated the inclusion of diverse stories and voices, particularly from marginalized communities.

However, the rise of citizen journalism also presents challenges related to credibility, accuracy, and professionalism. Noor (2017) underscores the tensions between citizen and mainstream journalism, noting that while citizen journalists provide valuable perspectives, their lack of formal training can sometimes result in the dissemination of unverified or biased information. Consequently, perceptions of local media content are shaped by both the inclusivity that citizen journalism fosters and concerns about the reliability of user-generated content.

### **Digital Transformation, Trust, and Local Media**

The digital transformation of media has profoundly reshaped the media landscape, presenting both opportunities and challenges for local media content. Digital platforms have expanded the reach of local media, enhancing accessibility and fostering engagement with diverse audiences. However, this shift has also intensified competition and raised concerns about content quality and reliability. The integration of digital tools and platforms has necessitated a re-evaluation of traditional media practices, particularly in terms of inclusivity, representation, and adherence to journalistic standards.

Trust remains a fundamental factor in audience perceptions of news. Research indicates that local media tends to enjoy higher levels of trust compared to national and international outlets. According to the Pew Research Center (2019), 71% of Americans express at least some trust in local news organizations, compared to 54% for national news. This heightened trust is largely attributed to the proximity and relevance of local content to audiences' daily lives, as well as the perceived accountability and community focus of local media outlets.

The digital era has introduced additional complexities to this dynamic. While digital platforms have democratized access to information and enabled greater audience participation, they have also contributed to the spread of misinformation and the erosion of traditional revenue models for local journalism. These factors have the potential to undermine public trust if not effectively addressed. Consequently, local media must navigate this dual reality by leveraging digital tools to enhance accessibility and inclusivity while maintaining rigorous standards of accuracy and reliability.

The 2023 Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media report outlines key recommendations to address challenges in the Maldivian media landscape. The report emphasizes the need for a more sustainable media sector, highlighting the role of government and political leaders in reducing media vulnerability to political or corporate influence. It also underscores the importance of strengthening editorial independence through ethical standards, codes of conduct, and professional training for journalists and editors. Furthermore, the report advocates for greater transparency in media funding, recommending

the establishment of a national accountability mechanism to counteract economic and political pressures that compromise media independence.

### **Quality of Content**

The quality of local media content plays a pivotal role in shaping audience perceptions. High-quality journalism, characterized by accuracy, depth, and relevance, fosters trust and engagement among audiences. Napoli et al. (2017) argue that the quality of local news is assessed based on factors such as comprehensiveness, journalistic integrity, and the balance of perspectives. Conversely, poorly produced content can lead to skepticism and disengagement.

### **Socio-Political Environment**

The socio-political environment in which local media operates significantly influences audience perceptions. In regions with high media freedom, local media often functions as a watchdog, holding authorities accountable and amplifying diverse voices. Conversely, in more restrictive settings, local media may be perceived as biased or controlled, undermining its credibility. McLeod et al. (2016) found that political polarization exacerbates perceptions of media bias, contributing to declining trust and engagement.

The 2023 Media Mirror report highlights the challenges and opportunities within the Maldivian media landscape. It underscores the importance of an independent media sector in fostering democracy, stating that “a healthy democracy relies on an independent media to inform citizens with accurate information in the public interest and with critical coverage that holds the powerful to account.” However, the report identifies significant challenges, including political ownership and influence on media coverage.

Further, the European Union Election Observation Mission’s Final Report on the 2023 Maldives Presidential Election raises concerns about media partisanship, the concentration of media outlets in the capital, and the impact of political influence on public discourse. The financial dependence of media outlets on state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has hindered fair competition and the development of an independent media sector. Moreover, restrictions on freedom of expression and legal provisions compelling journalists to disclose sources have created a chilling effect on investigative journalism.

Despite these challenges, trust in Maldivian media has improved, with 82% of respondents agreeing that media is vital for a stable democracy. The Media Mirror report calls for increased support for media sustainability, stronger editorial independence, transparent funding mechanisms, media literacy campaigns, and enhanced ethical standards through journalist training. These measures aim to strengthen public trust and ensure the media’s role as a pillar of democracy.

### **Impact of Digital Transformation**

The digital transformation of media has significantly influenced local media consumption and perception. While online platforms have democratized content creation, they have also facilitated the spread of misinformation and contributed to the decline of traditional local news outlets. Abernathy (2020) discusses the phenomenon of “news deserts,” where communities lose access to local journalism, resulting in reduced civic engagement and public awareness. Despite these challenges, digital

tools offer opportunities to enhance accessibility and involve citizen journalists, thereby improving the inclusivity and representativeness of local media content.

### **Audience Engagement**

Audience engagement is a key indicator of positive perceptions of local media. Interactive and community-focused content tends to foster higher levels of engagement. Hyperlocal journalism, which addresses specific community issues, enhances audience involvement and trust. Metzgar et al. (2011) observes that hyperlocal news sites often fill gaps left by traditional media, providing valuable services to their audiences.

### **Methodology**

To address the research questions, a mixed-method approach was employed. The primary data was collected through an online survey, which targeted 200 participants and successfully garnered 214 responses over 17 days. The survey comprised four sections: demographics, media usage frequency and trends, Media personal and production houses / newsrooms and subscription based content. The survey aimed to capture the perceptions and opinions of the Maldivian audience regarding media content. Conceptual Clarifications

### **Findings**

#### **Characteristics of Respondents**

The survey respondents present a well-rounded demographic profile, as outlined in Table 1a. Gender representation is relatively balanced, with female respondents comprising 46.7% of the sample and male respondents making up 53.3%. This slight majority of male participants suggests a close gender balance, enhancing the representativeness of the survey findings across genders. Such balance is crucial for ensuring that the perspectives captured reflect both gender viewpoints, particularly in discussions related to gender equality and diversity within media environments.

The age distribution among respondents (Table 1b) indicates that the majority fall within the 26 to 35 years (48.1%) and 36 to 45 years (31.3%) age groups. This concentration suggests that the survey predominantly reflects the views of individuals in their early to mid-career stages, who are likely to possess substantial professional experience and active engagement within the media industry. Younger respondents, those under 25 years, account for 13.6% of the sample, while older age groups, particularly those over 45 years, are represented at lower percentages. Notably, there is minimal representation from the 56 to 65 years age group, and only 1.4% of respondents are aged 65 years and above. This distribution suggests that the survey may have limited input from older, potentially more seasoned professionals.

The geographical distribution data (Table 1c) reveals that a significant majority of respondents (80.4%) are based in Mid Maldives/Malé City. This centralization reflects the concentration of media activity and industry presence in the capital region, where many media organizations and production houses are headquartered. Respondents from North Maldives (7.9%) and South Maldives (7%) are also represented, albeit to a lesser extent, indicating that while the survey captures a broad geographic spread, it remains predominantly skewed towards the capital. Additionally, 4.7% of respondents are based outside the Maldives.

In terms of professional background (Table 1d), respondents represent a diverse



range of workplaces. A significant portion (49%) are employed in news or media production houses, highlighting the involvement of individuals directly engaged in content creation and dissemination. Furthermore, 14.5% of respondents work in media regulatory bodies, providing insights from those involved in the oversight and governance of the media industry. Students constitute 6.1% of the respondents, offering a perspective from emerging professionals still in the process of acquiring formal education and training in media. The largest professional category, however, is the public sector, which accounts for 56.5% of respondents. This indicates a broad engagement with media-related issues from outside the industry itself.

Additionally, the survey explores respondents' involvement in freelance journalism, citizen journalism, or content production (Table 1e). A substantial 40.2% identify as freelancers, citizen journalists, or content producers, while 59.8% do not engage in such activities. This significant proportion of freelancers and independent content creators suggests a dynamic and diverse media landscape, where a substantial portion of content generation occurs outside traditional media organizations. The presence of these independent voices is essential for fostering a pluralistic media environment, allowing for a broader range of perspectives to be shared and discussed.

Overall, the characteristics of the survey respondents indicate a well-rounded and diverse sample, with a balanced gender representation, a strong focus on mid-career professionals, and a predominant geographic concentration in Malé City. The inclusion of professionals from various sectors of the media industry, alongside a notable presence of independent content creators, ensures that the survey findings provide a comprehensive and representative reflection of the broader media landscape in the Maldives.

*Table 1: Characteristics of Respondents*

	Numbers (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>a) Gender</b>		
Female	100	46.7%
Male	114	53.3%
<b>b) Age</b>		
Under 25	29	13.6%
26 to 35	103	48.1%
36 to 45	67	31.3%
46 to 55	12	5.6%
56 to 65	0	0%
65 and above	3	1.4%
<b>c) Geographical Location</b>		
Mid Maldives/Male City	17	7.9%
North Maldives	172	80.4%
South Maldives	15	7%
Based Outside Maldives	10	4.7%
<b>d) Place of work</b>		
Media Regulatory Body	31	14.5%
News / media production house	49	49%
Students	13	6.1%
Public	121	56.5%

	Numbers (N)	Percentage (%)
e) Are you a freelancer, citizen journalist, or content producer?		
Yes	86	40.2%
No	128	59.8%

**Media Usage Trends and Consumption Patterns**

The data presented in Table 2 provides a comprehensive analysis of media usage frequency and trends among respondents, highlighting the dominant role of digital platforms in accessing local news, information, and entertainment content. Social media emerges as the primary source, with 89.7% of respondents indicating its use, followed by online news websites at 60.3%. This heavy reliance on digital platforms underscores the shift towards online media consumption, reflecting broader global trends in which traditional media formats are increasingly supplemented or replaced by digital alternatives.

**Traditional Media Consumption**

Despite the prevalence of digital media, Table 2a indicates that television remains a significant medium, albeit with a smaller user base, as only 17.3% of respondents identified it as their primary source of content. The use of radio is notably low, with only 3.3% of respondents relying on it, suggesting a decline in traditional audio broadcasting compared to other media formats. Similarly, subscription-based applications and podcasts are used by 3.7% of respondents, indicating a niche but gradually expanding interest in these platforms.

An analysis of media usage frequency, as illustrated in Table 2b, reinforces the dominance of social media and news websites, with 89.7% and 60.3% of respondents, respectively, using these platforms most frequently. Television is the third most frequently used medium at 17.3%, followed by subscription-based apps and podcasts, each with 3.7% usage. Radio remains the least utilized medium, with only 3.3% of respondents indicating regular engagement. Notably, the data reveals a decrease in social media (-7.3%) and news website usage (-10.8%) during weekends (Friday and Saturday), coinciding with an increase in television (17.6%) and radio (32.4%) consumption. This trend suggests that traditional media formats may experience a resurgence on weekends, likely due to variations in content consumption habits during leisure periods. In contrast, subscription-based applications maintain a consistent user base throughout the week, with no observed fluctuations in usage patterns.

**Media Consumption Patterns**

In 2024, Meltwater, in collaboration with We Are Social, released the Digital 2024 report, providing comprehensive insights into global digital and social media trends. The report highlights that the number of active social media users has surpassed the 5 billion mark, accounting for 62.3% of the global population. This represents an increase of 266 million users over the past year, marking an annual growth rate of 5.6%. The typical social media user now spends approximately two hours and 23 minutes daily on various platforms, engaging with an average of 6.7 platforms each month. TikTok leads in user engagement, with Android users spending an average of 34 hours per month on the platform, which equates to more than an



hour per day. YouTube follows, with users spending just over 28 hours per month on its Android app.

In terms of platform preference, Instagram has emerged as the most favored social media platform, with 16.5% of internet users aged 16 to 64 identifying it as their preferred platform, surpassing WhatsApp, which holds 16.1%.

Table 2c further explores media consumption habits among respondents, revealing a strong preference for digital platforms. A significant proportion (87.4%) of participants reported spending more than two hours daily on social media, making it the most frequently used medium. Online news websites also exhibit substantial engagement, with 33.6% of respondents spending over two hours per day on these platforms, reflecting an increasing shift towards online news consumption.

In contrast, traditional media platforms demonstrate significantly lower usage rates. Only 16.4% of respondents reported watching television for more than two hours daily, while radio exhibited the lowest engagement, with just 1.4% of respondents listening for a similar duration. Subscription-based applications maintain moderate popularity, with 7.9% of participants dedicating considerable time to these platforms. Podcasts, however, remain the least engaged medium, with only 3.7% of respondents dedicating more than two hours daily to listening. This data underscores the predominance of digital media in daily life, particularly social media, while traditional media formats continue to experience a decline in preference.

### **Findings from the 2023 Media Mirror Report**

The 2023 Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media report provides critical insights into contemporary media consumption patterns in the Maldives. The findings indicate a pronounced shift towards digital media, with 67% of respondents identifying online news portals as their primary source of daily news. Television ranks as the second most utilized medium, cited by 53% of respondents. Furthermore, online news platforms are the most frequently accessed media type, with 61% of respondents reporting regular engagement. This significantly surpasses traditional media consumption rates, including television (25%), newspapers and magazines (9%), and radio (5%).

A notable trend highlighted in the report is the higher perceived quality, trustworthiness, balance, and accuracy of news obtained through personal acquaintances compared to traditional news outlets. This suggests a growing skepticism toward institutional media sources and an increasing reliance on interpersonal communication for news dissemination.

### **Social Media as a Primary News Source**

Regarding social media usage, Facebook emerges as the dominant platform for news access, with 64% of respondents identifying it as their primary source for online news. Other platforms, including Google (6%), Viber (5%), Instagram (5%), and Twitter (3%), were significantly less popular. These findings underscore the increasing reliance on digital and social media platforms for news consumption in the Maldives, aligning with broader global trends in media engagement and the evolving dynamics of information dissemination in the digital age, as documented in the 2023 Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media report.

Table 2: Media Usage Frequency and trends

	Numbers (N)				Percentage (%)		
<b>a) Where do you mostly get your local news content?</b>							
TV	37				17.3%		
Radio	7				3.3%		
social media	192				89.7%		
News Websites	129				60.3%		
Subscription Based Apps	8				3.7%		
Podcast	8				3.7%		
<b>b) How content is consumed during the week</b>	<b>Sun</b>	<b>Mon</b>	<b>Tue</b>	<b>Wed</b>	<b>Thur</b>	<b>Fri</b>	<b>Sat</b>
TV	41	40	39	40	36	62	50
Radio	4	6	5	4	4	9	9
Social media	202	200	202	196	180	172	167
News Websites	143	145	142	141	128	113	112
Subscription Based Apps	23	23	23	21	20	22	22
Podcast	16	14	15	14	12	15	15
<b>c) How long do you use this service per day</b>					<b>&lt;1 Hr</b>	<b>1 Hr</b>	<b>2 Hr</b>
<b>6 Hr</b>							<b>3-5 Hr</b>
TV					41 23	23	10 2
Radio					22 3	2	0 1
Social media					16 17	41	94 52
News Websites					48 45	29	25 18
Subscription Based Apps					21 9	5	7 5
Podcast					20 13	5	1 2
	Numbers (N)				Percentage (%)		
<b>d) Media have an essential role in the development of the future of our society?</b>							
Yes	209				97.9%		
No	5				2.3%		
<b>e) Do you prefer local news on which platform?</b>							
TV	39				23.6%		
Print and News Websites	108				65.4%		
Radio	18				10.9%		
<b>f) Do you prefer local content (Film, Series, TV Shows, Documentary) on which platform?</b>							
TV	60				43.5%		
Print and news websites	64				46.4%		
Radio	14				10.1%		
Audio podcast	18				13.0%		

	Numbers (N)		Percentage (%)	
g) How content is consumed during the week	Yes N	%	No N	%
TV	124	57.9	90	42.1
Print and news websites	181	84.6	33	15.4
Radio	97	45.3	117	54.7
Audio podcast	86	40.2	128	59.8

### **Media's Role in Societal Development and Consumption Preferences**

The survey (Table 2d) examines the perceived role of media in shaping the future of society, with an overwhelming 97.9% of respondents affirming its essential contribution to societal development. In contrast, only 2.3% of respondents disagree, reflecting a broad consensus on the media's significance in influencing public discourse and fostering social progress.

### **Preferences for Consuming Local News**

Respondents' preferences for consuming local news (Table 2e) indicate a strong inclination toward digital platforms, with 65.4% favoring print and news websites. Television remains a secondary preference, cited by 23.6% of respondents, while radio is the least preferred medium, with only 10.9% reporting its use for local news. These findings align with the broader trend of digital dominance in media consumption, where online platforms are increasingly preferred due to their accessibility and immediacy.

### **Consumption of Local Content**

Regarding local content such as films, television series, talk shows, and documentaries (Table 2f), media preferences appear more evenly distributed. Print and news websites maintain a slight lead, with 46.4% of respondents favoring these platforms, followed closely by television at 43.5%. Radio is preferred by 10.1% of respondents, while 13.0% favor audio podcasts. This distribution suggests that although digital platforms continue to gain prominence, television remains a highly relevant medium for visual content consumption.

### **Weekly Media Consumption Patterns**

The data on content consumption habits throughout the week (Table 2g) provides further insights into respondents' media usage patterns. A majority (57.9%) of participants report watching television during the week, whereas 42.1% do not. Print and news websites are the most widely utilized platforms, with 84.6% of respondents engaging with them, compared to 15.4% who do not. Radio is listened to by 45.3% of respondents, while a slight majority (54.7%) report not using this medium. Similarly, 40.2% of respondents consume audio podcasts during the week, whereas 59.8% do not.

These findings indicate a diverse range of media consumption habits, with digital platforms leading in overall usage. However, traditional media, such as television and radio, continues to maintain a significant presence in respondents' weekly

routines, demonstrating its enduring relevance in the evolving media landscape.

*Table 3: Media personal and production houses / newsrooms*

	Numbers (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>a) Do you believe there is Gender equality in Newsrooms</b>		
Yes	92	45%
No	112	55%
<b>b) Do you believe there is Gender equality content production</b>		
Yes	95	44%
No	119	56%
<b>c) Do you think cultural and linguistic diversity in media content and production houses and newsrooms is important?</b>		
Yes	175	81.8%
No	5	2.3%
Maybe	34	15.9%
<b>d) Do you think tracking and measuring on demand content is important?</b>		
Yes	169	79%
No	13	6.1%
Maybe	32	15%
<b>e) Do you think tracking and measuring the quality of content is important?</b>		
Yes	203	94.9%
No	11	5.1%
<b>f) Do you prefer to get content in Maldivian different dialects / culturally significant?</b>		
(Maaley Bas) common dialect used in central Maldives	98	45.8%
News and content in dialects	25	11.7%
Occasional news and content in dialects	91	42.5%
<b>g) Do you think there is enough content made based on Maldivian stories and local connections?</b>		
Yes	41	19.2%
No	173	80.8%

	Numbers (N)	Percentage (%)
<b>h) Do you believe there is a need and social responsibility to create content for underrepresented communities, such as those who are blind or deaf?</b>		
Yes	190	88.8%
No	4	1.9%
Maybe	20	9.3%
<b>i) Involvement of diverse employees with visible disabilities?</b>		
Yes	190	88.8%
No	2	0.9%
Maybe	22	10.3%

### **Perceptions of Gender Equality, Diversity, and Content Production in the Media**

The data presented in (Table 3) provides critical insights into perceptions surrounding gender equality, diversity, and content production within media organizations, including production houses and newsrooms. These findings illuminate prevailing attitudes within the media industry and highlight both challenges and opportunities for fostering inclusivity and representation.

#### **Gender Equality in Media Workplaces and Content Production**

An examination of gender equality reveals a concerning disparity. A majority of respondents (Table 3a), 55%, do not believe that gender equality exists within newsrooms, while only 45% hold the opposite view. This suggests that despite ongoing discussions regarding gender parity in the media, substantial progress remains necessary to achieve true equality. Similarly, perceptions of gender equality in content production (Table 3b) are predominantly negative, with 56% of respondents asserting that equality is lacking, compared to 44% who believe it has been achieved. These findings underscore persistent concerns about the underrepresentation and potential marginalization of women in both the creation and management of media content.

#### **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Media**

Cultural and linguistic diversity is widely recognized as a critical component of media content (Table 3c). A significant 81.8% of respondents believe that diversity within production houses, newsrooms, and media content is important. This overwhelming support highlights a broad recognition of the value that diverse voices contribute to the media landscape by enriching content and making it more reflective of its audience. In contrast, only 2.3% of respondents do not consider diversity important, while 15.9% remain uncertain. This suggests that while there is broad agreement on the need for diversity, uncertainty persists regarding the most effective strategies for its implementation.

### **Measuring and Tracking Media Content**

The importance of tracking and evaluating media content is also strongly emphasized in the data (Table 3d). Specifically, 79% of respondents believe that monitoring on-demand content is essential, with only 6.1% disagreeing and 15% remaining undecided. This finding highlights a widespread belief in the necessity of understanding audience engagement and preferences in an increasingly digital media landscape. Even more compelling is the perceived importance of assessing content quality (Table 3e), with an overwhelming 94.9% of respondents considering this aspect crucial. This near-universal consensus underscores the fundamental role of high-quality content in maintaining audience trust and upholding journalistic standards.

### **Linguistic Preferences in Media Content**

Respondents' linguistic preferences (Table 3f) reflect a diverse range of opinions. While 45.8% favor content in Maaleey Bas, the predominant dialect spoken in central Maldives, there is also notable support for content in other dialects. Specifically, 11.7% prefer news and media content in regional dialects, while 42.5% favor occasional inclusion of such content. These findings suggest that while a widely understood dialect remains the preferred medium of communication, there is also a strong desire for linguistic diversity in media, catering to both national and regional audiences.

### **Representation of Maldivian Stories and Local Narratives**

A significant gap exists in the production of content that reflects Maldivian stories and local experiences (Table 3g). A substantial majority of respondents (80.8%) believe that there is insufficient media content rooted in local narratives, while only 19.2% disagree. This finding indicates a strong demand for media that authentically represents Maldivian culture, history, and lived experiences, suggesting that audiences seek content that resonates more closely with their own identities and heritage.

### **Media's Role in Addressing Underrepresented Communities**

The survey findings reveal widespread agreement on the need for media to address the concerns of underrepresented communities (Table 3h). An overwhelming 88.8% of respondents believe that media organizations have a social responsibility to produce content for marginalized groups, including the blind and deaf communities. Only 1.9% disagree, while 9.3% remain uncertain. Similarly, the inclusion of diverse employees, particularly those with visible disabilities, is considered important by 88.8% of respondents (Table 3i). These findings highlight a growing awareness of and commitment to fostering inclusivity within media organizations, reinforcing the need for workplaces that are representative of the broader society.



*Table 4 Subscription based content*

	Numbers (N)		Percentage (%)	
<b>a) Are you willing to pay for subscription-based news and Media content?</b>				
Yes	138		64.5%	
No	76		35.5%	
<b>b) With Subscription based news what would be the effect on</b>				
	<b>Yes</b>		<b>No</b>	
	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Quality of content	176	83.8	34	16.2
Produce on demand content	163	79.1	43	20.9
Independent and integrity	154	74.4	53	25.6
<b>c) Monthly payment for subscription-based news and Media content (Film, Series, TV Shows, Documentary, Podcast)?</b>				
MVR 100 / month	42		19.6%	
MVR 200 / month	132		61.7%	
Willing to pay	22		10.2%	
Other suggestions (Not willing to pay)	18		8.4%	

### **Financial Independence and Subscription-Based Media Models**

The European Union Election Observation Mission's Final Report on the Maldives Presidential Election (9 September 2023) notes that while several past EU recommendations were fully or partially implemented, key recommendations concerning political finance and media oversight remain unaddressed.

Financial independence in the media is a cornerstone of both sustainability and content integrity. The data (Table 4: Subscription-Based Content) reveals a significant willingness among audiences to pay for subscription-based news and media content, suggesting a promising market for premium journalism. This willingness extends across various forms of media, including films, television series, shows, documentaries, and podcasts, available on both video and audio platforms. Specifically (Table 4a), a substantial 64.5% of respondents express their readiness to subscribe, underscoring the value they place on high-quality, relevant, and trustworthy content. This inclination suggests that a considerable segment of the audience recognizes the importance of financially supporting media, likely due to the perceived quality and reliability of subscription-based offerings. Conversely, 35.5% of respondents are unwilling to pay for subscriptions, potentially due to a preference for free alternatives, financial constraints, or a lack of perceived value in paid content models.

### **Perceived Impact of Subscription-Based News**

The data highlights a strong belief in the positive impact of subscription-based news models on various aspects of media production and quality. According to the findings (Table 4b), 83.3% of respondents believe that subscription-based news will enhance content quality. This reflects confidence that financial support through subscriptions will enable media organizations to invest in superior resources, maintain higher journalistic standards, and conduct more in-depth research,

ultimately resulting in improved content. However, 16.2% of respondents express skepticism, questioning whether financial incentives will genuinely lead to better content or whether profit motives may compromise journalistic integrity.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Digital News Report 2024) indicates that in 20 countries where publishers actively promote digital subscriptions, the rate of payment for online news has nearly doubled since 2014, rising from 10% to 17%. This trend highlights the growing global shift towards paid digital news models, reinforcing the relevance of the findings in the Maldivian context.

Additionally, the data (Table 4b) shows that 79.1% of respondents believe that subscription-based news will improve the ability to produce on-demand content. This suggests widespread confidence that a steady revenue stream will enable media organizations to tailor content more effectively to audience needs and preferences, offering more personalized and relevant news coverage. Conversely, 20.9% of respondents do not share this optimism, possibly due to concerns that financial incentives may prioritize content that appeals to the majority, potentially neglecting niche topics or alternative perspectives.

### **Media Independence and Integrity**

The issue of media independence and integrity is also addressed in the data. A majority (Table 4b), 74.4%, of respondents believe that subscription-based news will help maintain or even enhance the independence and integrity of media. This reflects confidence that financial independence from advertisers and external pressures will allow media outlets to operate more freely and uphold journalistic ethics without compromising content to appease sponsors or political influences. However, 25.6% of respondents express concerns that subscription models may not necessarily preserve, and could even harm, media independence and integrity. This skepticism suggests fears that reliance on subscriber revenue may lead to content that caters primarily to the preferences of paying audiences rather than adhering to objective journalistic standards.

### **Willingness to Pay and Subscription Tiers**

Further analysis of the data (Table 4c) indicates that a significant portion of respondents (61.7%) are comfortable paying MVR 200 per month for subscription services. This finding suggests a robust market for higher-tier subscriptions, where consumers are willing to invest more in exchange for premium content. Additionally, 19.6% of respondents are amenable to paying MVR 100 per month, indicating the presence of a market for more affordable subscription options. These payment preferences highlight varying levels of financial commitment among audiences and suggest opportunities for media organizations to introduce tiered subscription models catering to different segments of the market.

### **Framework mechanism**

The proposed framework prioritizes accessibility and inclusivity, aiming to enhance opportunities, flexibility, and work-life balance for diverse populations. This includes individuals with disabilities, parents on leave, students in training, and communities in remote areas. By providing financial support and professional pathways for remote employment, this initiative offers substantial economic

benefits to participants. Simultaneously, media organizations engaging with these individuals gain access to a more diverse talent pool, fostering enriched storytelling, enhanced cultural representation, and strengthened local connections. This approach contributes to the development of a more inclusive and representative media landscape.

### **Strengthening Media Independence and Ethical Standards**

The 2023 Media Mirror: Unveiling Public Trust in the Maldivian Media report outlines several key recommendations for strengthening the Maldivian media sector. These recommendations include:

1. Establishing transparent funding mechanisms to mitigate concerns regarding economic and political influences on media independence.
2. Enhancing financial and structural support to ensure the sustainability and resilience of media organizations, reducing their susceptibility to external pressures.
3. Reinforcing editorial independence, particularly in relation to media ownership, to uphold journalistic integrity.
4. Implementing targeted strategies and awareness campaigns to promote media literacy, thereby improving public comprehension of media content and its societal role.
5. Advancing ethical journalism through comprehensive training programs designed to uphold accuracy, impartiality, and credibility in news dissemination.

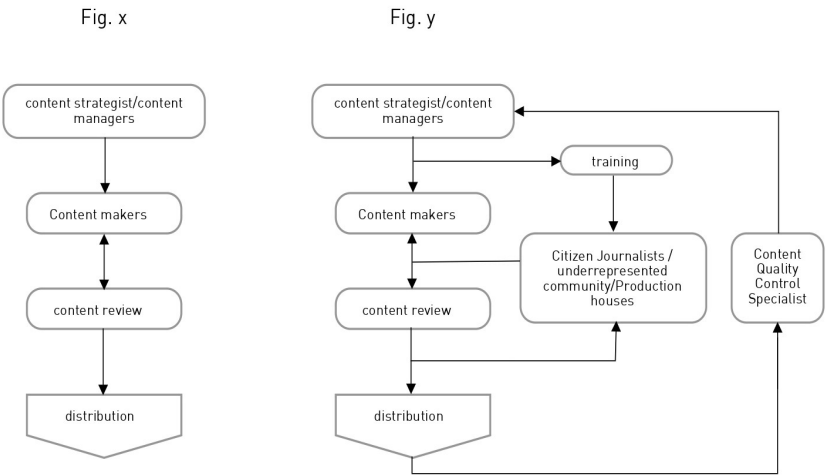
Despite these recommendations, newspapers in the Maldives have been observed to align with specific political ideologies, often with the intent of misleading the public. While it is the fundamental responsibility of journalists to uphold truth and ensure accurate reporting, the absence of a robust accountability mechanism to monitor media practices and enforce ethical standards remains a significant concern. Furthermore, no comprehensive guidelines have been established to identify and address misleading or biased news stories.

### **Addressing Misinformation and Media Accountability**

The Parliament Election 2024 Pre-election Assessment Report by the Human Rights Commission of the Maldives (HRCM) raised concerns regarding misinformation during the 2023 presidential election. Based on field visits and stakeholder consultations, the report recommended the formulation of media guidelines to counteract the spread of untrue or misleading news. This underscores the urgent need for structured frameworks to ensure media accountability and promote ethical journalism. Such measures are critical to safeguarding the integrity of public discourse and fostering a media environment that prioritizes truth and impartiality.

Similarly, the EU Election Observation Mission: Maldives Presidential Election, 9 September 2023 Final Report highlighted a significant challenge in the Maldivian media sector: the declining interest among young people in pursuing careers in journalism. Additionally, the absence of formal academic qualification requirements for journalists has impeded the professionalization of the field. While most media organizations provide basic training for their staff, there is an urgent need for more structured and comprehensive professional development programs. The report recommended the implementation of training and professional development courses for journalists and editors to equip them with the necessary knowledge and skills to produce balanced, ethical, and responsible journalism, particularly in the context of election coverage.

These strategic measures are designed to enhance public trust in the media, promote long-term sustainability, and reinforce the media’s role as a fundamental pillar of democracy. By addressing existing challenges, this framework seeks to cultivate a more transparent, inclusive, and resilient media ecosystem in the Maldives.



**Proposed Content Production Framework**

The standard workflow in Maldivian newsrooms and production houses is depicted in two models. The first model (Figure X) illustrates a conventional content flow within a media organization, where content strategists, managers, and editors oversee the content creation process. Content creators develop material and submit it to a review team or department, ensuring a two-way communication process between creators and reviewers. Once finalized, the content is forwarded to the distribution team for public release.

The proposed model (Figure Y) expands upon this traditional structure by integrating Citizen Journalists, underrepresented communities, and independent production houses into the content creation process. These contributors receive training and adhere to established brand guidelines before submitting content for review. A two-way communication process is maintained between reviewers and all contributors, ensuring editorial alignment. Additionally, the model introduces a Content Quality Control Specialist, responsible for evaluating content from external sources and providing feedback to content strategists and managers. This measure is designed to enhance the quality and credibility of journalistic output through continuous assessment and improvement.

**Comparative Perspectives on Local Media and Inclusion**

The role of local media in fostering informed public discourse and social cohesion has been widely recognized in international contexts. In Australia, research highlights the significance of local media in rural and regional areas, particularly in providing essential information and strengthening community engagement (Simons, 2015). Similarly, in developing countries, local media serves as a crucial platform for education, civic participation, and community development

(Nyamnjoh, 2005).

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) exemplifies best practices in fostering diversity and inclusion in media production. Approximately 30% of content creator roles at ABC are occupied by employees from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLAD) backgrounds. Under the ABC Diversity & Inclusion Plan 2019–22, key initiatives included the establishment of specialized mentoring streams for CALD communities, women in technology, and gender equity. These efforts continue under the Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging Plan 2023–2026, demonstrating a sustained commitment to representation and inclusion within the media sector.

### **Recommendations**

The recommendations and suggestions for further research in person would help to do qualitative deeper analysis of the data that can provide more insights into specific demographic groups and their media consumption patterns on elderly communities who don't use the internet to get information in the small island communities.

Placing a is crucial in maintaining the reputation and professionalism in the media management and news rooms, as well as ensuring that viewers receive technical quality, branding and policies, feedback and accountability, content review, regulatory compliance, accuracy checked content that is informative, entertaining, and safe to watch.

Encourage development of independent fact checking mechanisms or fact checkers in the community and provide an easy way for excess information using digital tools (archives and historical content, scientific researches, academic, statistical data, easy access to National Archive Footage of State Media. .

Tracking changes in media consumption and preferences over time can help media organizations adapt to evolving audiences that need to be strengthened by the updated data. Focusing on these areas will help media organizations in the Maldives create a more diverse, inclusive, and engaging media landscape that better serves its audience.

Increase the culture of remotely working across the nation and increase using digital tools (shared documents, collaborative platforms for newsrooms, collaborative editing tools), information collection in real time from websites and social platforms, monetizing on social media content, increase the presence of media in social platforms with local on demand content and royalty based sharing of content.

To foster a workplace culture that is inclusive, encourages underrepresented communities to join the workforce as professionals, collaborative and accountable and supports the talent and diversity is key in the development of Maldivian media.

### **Conclusion**

The perception of local media content is shaped by multiple factors, including the representation and inclusion of underrepresented communities, the role of citizen journalists, trust in media, content quality, the socio-political environment, and the impact of digital transformation. While local media often benefits from higher levels of public trust, challenges such as digital disruption and media consolidation pose significant threats to its sustainability and credibility.

Within newsrooms and production houses, fostering a culture that encourages the inclusion of diverse employees—across gender, age, language, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds—as well as individuals with disabilities (including visible disabilities) is essential. Moreover, promoting the production of independent and on-demand content that delivers news, information, and entertainment can further enhance the industry's relevance and engagement.

The continuous professional development of citizen journalists and other media creatives in ethical journalism and technical skills is crucial. Establishing quality standards for citizen journalists and independent creatives can facilitate their employment or collaboration with newsrooms and production houses. Given that many creatives are not inclined toward conventional academic pathways, it is imperative to develop a modern, diverse, and engaging curriculum that appeals to future generations and aligns with contemporary media industry demands.

In addition to content production and collaboration, it is equally important to implement robust monitoring and quality control mechanisms within newsrooms and broadcasting stations. Media policies should be formulated with academic rigor and designed to be future-proof, ensuring their long-term relevance and adaptability to evolving industry trends.

Future research should continue to explore these dynamics to enhance local media content and audience engagement across diverse demographics.

The proposed framework aims to improve accessibility, accountability, and diversity within the Maldivian media landscape. By addressing key challenges related to media independence, misinformation, and journalist training, these measures seek to strengthen public trust and reinforce the media's role as a democratic institution. Additionally, integrating community-based contributors and adopting best practices from international contexts can significantly enhance the resilience of the Maldivian media ecosystem. This approach fosters a more transparent, inclusive, and sustainable media industry, ensuring that diverse voices are adequately represented in public discourse.

### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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