Measuring Impact in Media Development

Key Trends

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Key Findings

As donors increasingly seek impact for their dollars, monitoring and evaluation has become an important part of the work carried out by media organizations, both news outlets and freedom of expression NGOs. However, their approach to evaluation needs improvement.

First of all, they have a propensity to evaluate everything. Some 80% of the organizations canvassed by this study said that they try to include "as much as possible" in the evaluation terms of reference. As a rule, they ask evaluation consultants to include all possible criteria in their assessments, rarely choosing to focus only on one or two of criteria that interest them the most.

Moreover, some 69% of them do not use the results of evaluations to alter their strategies, and that is because either the evaluation report is too general or the recommendations made by the evaluator are not very actionable. A fifth of the organizations say that their strategy process is so complicated that they completely ignore the results of evaluations during their strategy discussions.

That has to change, many of organizations admit.

Evaluation has to be shaped and initiated more by the staff working on the organization's programmatic issues; at the moment, this happens in only 1% of the cases.. They have to stop seeing evaluation as a reputation-building tool. "We have to be more critical of our own work and encourage consultants hired to carry out evaluations to be much more critical about what doesn't work in our organization and about all the factors that limit our impact," said a London-based expert working for a global NGO.

While impact and outcome evaluations remain important, the focus has to also shift towards sustainability and efficiency-focused evaluations that measure long-term impact and the resources put into these organizations, respectively. In terms of methodology, the combination of desk research and interviews is the most common evaluation method. Although it is the most cost effective methodological mix, more evaluation methods have to be included to improve the quality and depth of evaluation reports.

Finally, evaluations written in less technical language should be encouraged. The evaluation lingo makes evaluation reports look more professional, some say. But it doesn't make them more popular. Reports written in more accessibly terms would only ensure that they reach more people, which will most likely lead to increased use.

"In short, we need to do less by focusing on one or very few issues, with more complex methods able to identify the causal link between our intervention and actual change," said a Kenya-based NGO worker.

Keeping Focused

Most organizations lack focus when they have to decide which parts of their work they want to evaluate. This is, arguably, the most striking finding of this study. Roughly 80% of organizations try to cram everything in the terms of reference for an evaluation job.

"We had this experience so many times: I and my colleagues decided from the onset to narrow the focus of the evaluation. But then, in the spirit of collegiality and team work, we invited comments and feedback. The more we shared these terms of reference, the longer and less structured they became as everybody added one criterion there, one "desired" method there," said an NGO worker from Africa.
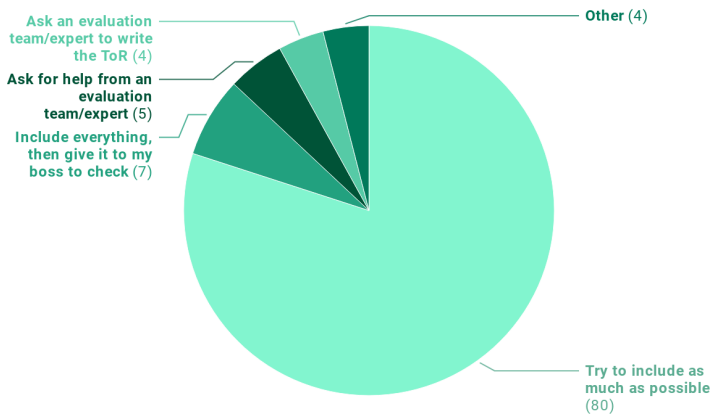
The reasons for this are threefold: lack of in-house evaluation knowledge and skills, the tendency (that sometimes develops into a mania) to measure everything, and the wrong assumption that evaluation is a method to beef up the reputation of an organization (rather than an impact measurement tool aimed, among other things, to help organizations improve).

Take skills shortage first. Most of the small and mid-size organizations lack a person (let's not even speak about a dedicated unit) in charge of handling the organization's evaluation and monitoring activities. The reason is primarily financial: they simply do not have such an expert on the payroll because they can't afford an additional cost. Most of the media NGOs are struggling financially, drawing chiefly on donor funds. As donors in the past decade have generally stopped covering the core costs of their grantees, these NGOs and media outlets have been trying to keep expenses at a minimum. As a result, impact evaluation is a job generally outsourced to external experts or teams of consultants. The terms of reference for these evaluations are usually written by the staff in charge of the project that is going to be evaluated.

Second, the tendency to measure as many aspects of an organization's work as possible is also partly a consequence of the lack of dedicated staff and internal resources for evaluation.

What do you include in your evaluation terms of reference?

% of total

Ask an evaluation team/expert to write the ToR (4)

Ask for help from an evaluation team/expert (5)

Include everything, then give it to my boss to check (7)

Other (4)

Try to include as much as possible (80)

Source: Marius Dragomir • Created with Datawrapper

"When we get some money [to hire evaluation consultants], we try to exploit this opportunity as much as possible," said a journalist working in Nigeria. "We want [the consultant] to tell us everything about our work: what we do well and what we do badly." But the tendency of excessively measuring impact is also prompted by donors' expectations. For many of these donor organizations, impact, as tangibly defined as possible, sits at the heart of their strategies.

Finally, a major shortcoming is the perception among many organizations that the evaluation is a form of Public Relations (PR), a tool used to gather information and data about the reputation, capacity and impact of the organization to be used in attracting more funders. "Very often I found myself presenting only the strengths of our work during interviews with evaluation consultants," said a representative of a cross-border journalism network operating in Eastern Europe. "This is partly because these evaluation efforts are led, initiated or required by donors, who are generally obsessed with impact. All that is right in the back of your mind. Hence, evaluation becomes a form of putting together everything great about you. You feel like this is the opportunity to prove yourself."

Choosing the Right Evaluation Type

More than three quarters of organizations commission impact and outcome evaluations on a regular basis. Goal-focused evaluations have been increasingly preferred in the past five years as more organizations embrace a model of more target-oriented strategies. Very few run what is known in the evaluation lingo as "formative evaluations," assessments run before the launch of a program to anticipate or forecast the future impact of a project.

Finally, cost analysis (or what some evaluation specialists refer to as "economic evaluation") is uncommon among media NGOs and media outlets. Although a majority of the organizations say that such cost analyses are desperately needed in the sector, nobody dares to even broach the topic, fearing to see the efficiency-related weaknesses that such an evaluation would unearth.

"Very few evaluation experts in our field know actually how to do that [cost analysis]," said a journalist working with a donor-funded media outlet in Central America. "We would love to have that kind of analysis that will tell us where our resources are going. However, I admit that I might be afraid of what we find out, which I expect it is true for all news media whose most valuable outputs, be they in-depth stories or investigative journalistic articles, are very expensive [to produce] and slow in drawing large audiences," said a journalist who fundraises for investigative outlets in eastern Europe.

Economic evaluations would be very useful in the field, but they have to be carefully implemented and framed within the larger context. Otherwise, they could lead to bad funding allocation decisions that can hurt the organization and reduce impact.

"What we would like to know is not who spends less or more on what. What would help is to essentially understand the power of one dollar; what impact can a dollar achieve: this is the question we would like to answer," said an expert from a London-based media freedom NGO.

Most preferred types of evaluation

Type of evaluation	Use by organizations (% of total)	Description	What it tries to find out
Impact evaluation	46	Studies the entire program from the start till the end, aiming at assessing how successful it has been	The changes in the target group that are attributable to the program
Outcome evaluation	35	Its main goal is to analyze how effective the program has been in reaching its stated goals	Generating data on the outcomes of the program, it aims to identify which of them are attributable to the program.
Goal-focused evaluation	12	Usually run towards the end of a program, it assesses the progress made by the program towards specific program targets	The degree to which the programs has met its goals
Process-focused evaluation	5	Run usually once the program is started to measure the quality of the program's procedures	The potential gaps in the program implementation
Formative evaluation	2	Carried out before the program implementation to develop the baseline for the monitoring	The needs of the program and methods to improve its design
Cost analysis	0	Its main goal is to analyze the benefits of the program compared to its costs	The areas where the programs resources are spent

Note: Respondents were invited to select among these six types of evaluations as well as to describe other forms of evaluations they have implemented (none of them added anything).

Criteria

The majority of organizations are using the OECD evaluation criteria, namely relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. [1] Most organizations (90%) usually expect evaluators to include all these criteria in their evaluation. More than half of them said that the criteria that organizations are most focused on are effectiveness and impact.

"When we get the evaluation paper [from our consultant], we first read the effectiveness part. It's human nature, we all want to know where we made mistakes, how well the machine worked, all that. Then, we look at impact to see whether really our work has led or is likely to lead to change. Reading those two parts is fascinating," said a New York-based monitoring and evaluation manager from a global NGO.

One notable change in the past five years has been a shift towards sustainability, coinciding with donors' growing interest in "tangible impact." As donor organizations have limited funds and prioritizing becomes extremely difficult, many of them want to understand what would happen with their grantees *if* or *when* they stop funding them. Donor organizations are increasingly basing their funding decision on this criterion alone. Some of them even decide not to finance an organization, however promising it might look like, simply because they don't have a long-term sustainability plan in place.

While this is to some extent a healthy approach, there are limits (and dangers) to it. "If donors only support organizations that prove to be in business one year or so after they [donors] are gone, then their job is very easy. They will only have to write 5-6 grant letters a year," said the development manager of an Arab language media outlet. In conclusion, sustainability is important to be given more prominence in the evaluation work, but it has to be discussed, again, within the larger context, taking into account more factors that can affect the performance of an organization. Moreover, donor organizations should accept more risk when they finance NGOs or media outlets. "This is their business: risk," said the New York-based evaluation manager.

[1] "Better Criteria for Better Evaluation: Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use," OECD, available online at https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-dec-2019.pdf.

One other key evaluation criterion, particularly important for media outlets, is audience. Various evaluators introduce this criterion in their evaluation mix under various names (i.e. participation) along with the other six OECD principles. As journalism and media are undergoing massive transformations, increasing and diversifying the audience has become a major concern for media organizations. Larger audiences attract donor funding and advertising revenue. Moreover, many media outlets are trying to capitalize on audiences by turning as many of their readers as possible in subscribers.

Strategy Games

Although evaluations are carried out to help organizations improve and change their work, follow-up on these evaluations, paradoxically, isn't a common practice. Consultants or companies that carry out evaluations are in most cases asked to make a presentation highlighting the key findings and summarizing the main recommendations of their assessment. All that information is aimed, in theory, at improving the organization's effectiveness.
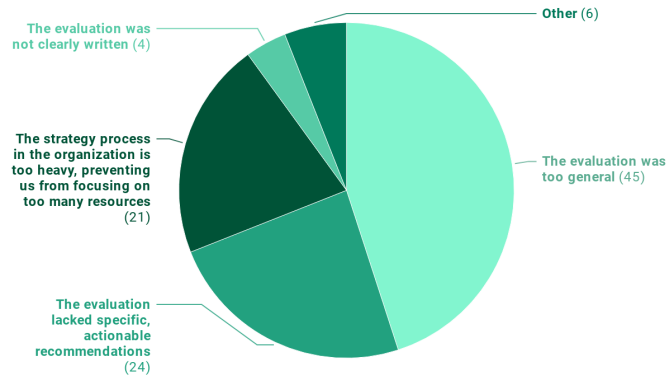
But what happens afterwards is a different story.

Some 80% of the organizations say that they generally select a few ideas or recommendations from the evaluations, chiefly those that are the most realistic and specific. However, very few organizations use the evaluations to alter their strategies. "That is a no-go area," said a legal expert working for a global NGO. "Suggesting to make changes in the strategy is like opening a can of worms; I am not even thinking how would be to suggest overhauling the strategy in the middle of the strategy period only because we have an evaluation report in hand."

Overall, less than a third of organizations use evaluation reports to change their strategy. Most of them do that as part of a new strategy process (when the organization enters a new strategy phase, for example).

Using evaluations in changing strategy: why not?

% of total

The evaluation was
not clearly written (4)

Other (6)

The strategy process
in the organization is
too heavy, preventing
us from focusing on
too many resources
(21)

The evaluation was
too general (45)

The evaluation
lacked specific,
actionable
recommendations
(24)

Source: Marius Dragomir, CMDS • Created with Datawrapper

In many cases, the evaluation reports are not too specific to help organizations shape their strategies. Some 69% of them say that they generally don't use findings from evaluation reports to change their strategy either because the evaluation reports are too general or because the recommendations put forward in these reports are too vague.

But whereas most organizations do not use evaluations to change their strategy, those that do that have experienced significant improvement. Nearly 95% of the one-third of the organizations that generally use the evaluation reports in their strategic development process reported major improvements in articulating their strategic goals. "The evaluation should be, in fact, closely linked to the strategic development [process]," said an activist working for a freedom of expression NGO in Ghana. "The strategy should be the main source that should be used to design the terms of reference for all evaluation projects in any organization."

Why They Do It

When it comes to the reasons for commissioning impact evaluations, an astounding 90% of the organizations say that requests from donors are the key trigger. "Donors want impact, their boards ask about impact all time; this pressure is passed onto us," said the head of a freedom of expression group operating internationally. "It's great to have funding to evaluate your work, but doing that to make sure you meet the expectations of your funder is a bit stressful."

Things get even more complicated when the donor is a government body, either Western European development programs or the U.S. State Department. In such projects, evaluation and monitoring is a major part of the application process and of the project itself.

Applicants for such grants must present detailed plans to monitor the progress that will be made by the project and devote a substantial part of their budget to this line of work. "We had several people working almost full-time on evaluation and monitoring for two whole years, which was the duration of the project," said a project officer with a U.S.-based international NGO, referring to a State Department grant.

"You collect data, put together log frames, build a massive depository of data about every move you make in the project and try to evaluate every single step you make. You include all that in the regular grant reporting, which is sometimes heavier than some parts of the actual project."

It is precisely because of this heavy reporting process that small organizations can't apply for such sizable grants (which can run to millions of dollars a year). On the other hand, the few organizations in our sample that received such a grant admitted that at the end of the day, they learned a lot from this complex evaluation process. "We had no clue [about] how to deal with such issues before," said a consultant who was hired to coordinate the evaluation activities for a government-funded project between 2014-2016. "We were used to small-scale evaluations. This was a totally different experience. But we learned a lot and although probably three quarters of the collected data did not serve any purposes, the rest was really important for all of us in the organization. We learned a lot about what kind of impact our work had (or had not)."

When it comes to media outlets, the expectations are even higher. Here, donors want both quantity and quality. "They first of all want large audience numbers," said the journalist from the media outlet in Central America. "They also want to change people's behavior and attitudes," said an NGO worker based in Kenya who works with journalists on a regular basis. "Stories are supposed to change people's voting preferences, to educate whole populations about health-related issues, and so on. Maybe that can be achieved: the problem is: how do you measure that?"

What prompts organizations to evaluate their impact
% of total

Requirement from the organization's board (or other supervisory governing structures) (3)

Requirement from superiors (program director, unit manager) (6)

Initiated by the team on its own (1)

Requirement from or expectation of the donors (90)

Source: Marius Dragomir, CMDS • Created with Datawrapper

In the internet age, tracking audience numbers is easier than it used to be some decades ago. However, numbers alone do not tell the full story: the audience growth has to be assessed in the overall context. "To get high readership numbers, we have to buy ads on social media or produce more popular, less elitist content," said a journalist working for a small media outlet in Myanmar. "It is an irony that we use donor money to pay these rich tech companies whose content distribution model, on the other hand, promotes lowbrow content over journalistic quality."
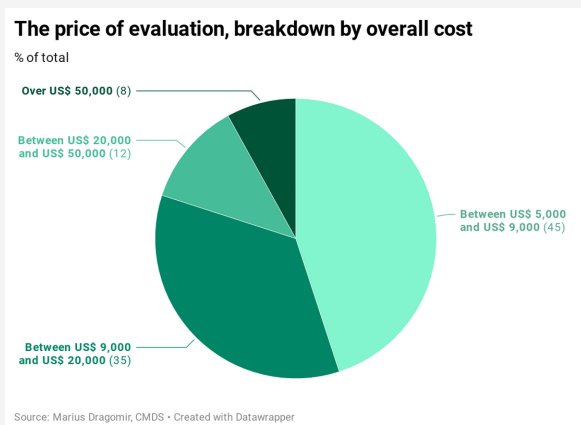
Instead of forcing media outlets to boost their audience, donor organizations should come together to think about projects that would lead to alternative distribution models for their grantees, according to a Nepal-based journalist. Second, funders should not only look for numbers, but encourage grantees to think about audience-centric journalistic models that would involve more creatively the audiences in the journalistic process. "People are already part of the news-gathering process. We have to acknowledge that and find ways to turn that reality into a new conversation between the audience and the journalists," the journalist from Central America said.
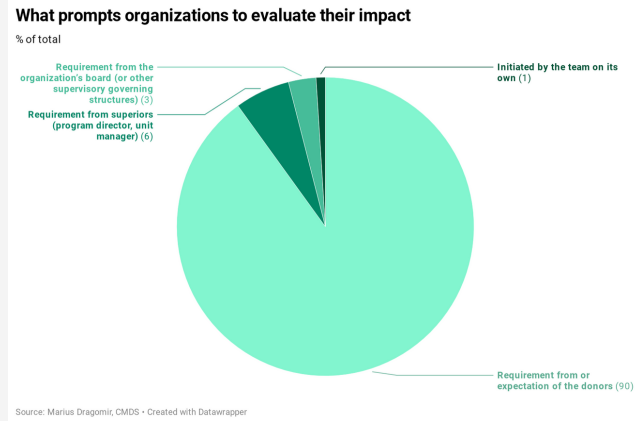
The Cost of Knowledge

The fee for evaluation work in the media development field ranges between US$ 300 and US$ 1,200 for a day of consultancy work. On average, evaluations require between 20 and 250 work days (distributed, in the case of large projects, among a team of consultants). The largest project encountered by this paper's author was an evaluation that cost upwards of US$ 200,000.

The cost of evaluation depends on the amount of work and complexity of the project or program that is evaluated. For example, larger projects spreading on more years require more human and financial resources than the evaluation of a one-year project. Generally, though, donors tend to keep evaluation-related costs down, roughly 80% of the evaluations documented by the author of this paper costing less than US$ 20,000.

The price of evaluation, breakdown by overall cost

% of total

Over US$ 50,000 (8)

Between US$ 20,000 and US$ 50,000 (12)

Between US$ 5,000 and US$ 9,000 (45)

Between US$ 9,000 and US$ 20,000 (35)

Source: Marius Dragomir, CMDS • Created with Datawrapper

The cost of evaluation has grown after 2009 as economies recovered and donors sought to find (and pay more for) proof of impact. The cost of a thousand words of evaluation analysis jumped by more than 80% between 2009 and 2013. As of 2013, the spending on evaluation work began to decline for various reasons, some of which are totally outside the scope of this study.

One of them, more than half of the organizations explained, is the pressure from the organizations' boards and donors organizations to be more efficient. Thus, many organizations, especially international ones, tended in the past five years to scale down the scope and budgets of the evaluation projects.

Cost of evaluation, average by written word and interviews, 2009-2018

Year	Average cost per 1,000 words (US$)	Average cost per interview conducted (US$)
2009	610	703
2010	720	810
2011	815	913
2012	1,100	1,250
2013	1,045	1,315
2014	987	1,200
2015	865	1,015
2016	657	916
2017	567	801
2018	511	703

Notes: The figures are estimates based on financial data from evaluation reports, using, when needed, the yearly average exchange rates of the Federal Reserve; data for 2019 were not included because they were not fully representative of existing trends (given the low number of projects included in the analysis); the figures are calculated as the total cost of the evaluation contract divided by the number of words of the final evaluation report and the total cost of the evaluation contract divided by the number of interviews carried out for the evaluation. Although there are many other components of the evaluation that influence the cost of an evaluation, the figures presented in this table are illustrative of the general trends in how evaluation work is costed.

Source: Marius Dragomir, CMDS • Created with Datawrapper

Methodology Preferences

Qualitative methodologies remain preponderant in evaluation of media development projects. In over 89% of the cases, qualitative and mixed (quantitative-qualitative methodologies, which in most cases were, in fact, qualitative) methodologies are used, which is not a major change compared to the years before 2015 that were documented in a few earlier studies on the topic. [2]

The most common methodological approach is a combination of desk research (research of existing reports, studies and articles, but also consultation of documents from the donor or grantee), and interviews with stakeholders. Some of the more complex projects include focus groups or consultations with local experts. Although there are major limitations to these types of methods, if the most appropriate persons are interviewed and the desk review collects all relevant data and information, this methodological approach can deliver good-quality evaluations at a fair cost. "We don't need an academic study to improve our work. We often need to take the pulse of the key experts and see who and how uses our work, if at all," said a journalist working for a media outlet in Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the projects that use more methods for impact evaluation deliver more nuanced findings and more actionable recommendations. These methods include content analysis, interviews with more people from the communities or institutions affected (or hoped to be affected) by the project, focus groups with community representatives, and audience surveys. Some of these methods, however, are extremely costly and therefore rarely used unless donors contribute massive amounts of funding for this purpose.

Some organizations, on the other hand, use simplified, less time-intensive and less expensive, versions of these complex methodologies. For example, content analysis can be adjusted to map the stories focused on only one aspect or component of the project. "In one such evaluation, we only mapped content that would help us understand whether some of our work directly triggered changes in policies," said the journalist working in Central America. Audience surveys can also be done cheaper by using technologies that track readers and their consumption patterns. Although this form of audience tracking has its own limitations, especially for organizations that work with communities not well connected online, it is increasingly used in evaluations, especially by media content providers.

[1] The most recent is Jessica Noske-Turner, "10 Years of Evaluation Practice in Media Assistance: Who, When, Why and How?," Nordic Council of Ministers, NORDICOM, 2015, in Nordicom Review, Vol. 36, no Special Issue, p. 41-56.

Finally, being on the ground significantly improves the quality of the evaluation. Advanced technologies allow consultants to interview people remotely. Moreover, much of the data collection work can be carried out via the internet. However, being on the ground and meeting people in person is also very important for a successful evaluation.

Some 75% of the organizations say that they encourage or require evaluators to travel to the place where the organization is based. "We know that sometimes the most interesting things are said once the interview is finished. This is not possible through a Skype interview," said the director of a media NGO in Romania. Moreover, gaining people's trust is extremely important to dig deeper in more sensitive projects. "To do that, you have to see people face to face, meet them, see them again the next day and then again the following day," said the NGO worker based in Kenya.

How to Write It

The language of most evaluation reports is usually technical, using concepts, criteria and indicators anchored in a terminology widely understood by evaluation experts (and only them, sometimes). However, organizations crave for more innovation and fresh approaches to writing evaluation reports. "I would welcome a more journalistic way of writing these reports instead of the heavy magnum opuses written in the dull evaluation jargon that we usually get," said a London-based journalist working with an international NGO.

But that doesn't happen mostly because the management of the organizations or the donors require, as a rule, technical reports that make use of all the terms and definitions in evaluation.

"I once received from our consultant a beautifully written text; I couldn't even believe that an evaluation report could be written like that. It presented trends in crisp sentences, framed the problems and weakness in blunt language; it was the no-bullshit type of analysis you rarely see. But I had to send it back to the consultant because our evaluation guys said that it should be reviewed to sound more 'professional'," said an activist working as a project officer with a global freedom of expression NGO.

This tension between evaluation experts who want dry, "serious" evaluation reports and project officers and experts (those who in the majority of cases use the evaluation the most) who want shorter, better written evaluation reports has been witnessed in more than half of the organizations documented in this study.

Looking Ahead

Journalism and media will be dramatically affected by the Covid-19 crisis. However, as we've seen during the pandemic disaster, access to impartial sources of accurate information is crucial at times of profound crisis. The economic crisis is expected, however, to have a lasting impact on media as both commercial and public resources for media and journalism are likely to dwindle. The onus will be on donor organizations and philanthropies to bankroll independent media. How they will react to the new realities is yet to be seen. It is quite likely though that they will strive to more accurately assess the impact of their grantees to ensure that they use their money wisely.

Thus, a few things are likely to happen in the near future.

First, evaluations will have to have more focused, with organizations likely to monitor and evaluate only the key, impact-related, parts or their work. As funders will become increasingly careful about priorities and spending, economic evaluations or assessments focused on measuring the financial cost of impact are expected to be carried out on a more regular basis.

Increasingly, sustainability is expected to gain even more weight in evaluations as donors will try to identify and fund projects that put forward and promise long-term solutions.

These shifts will force organizations to better connect the evaluation results with their strategies. As the pandemic aftershocks will be felt over the course of many years, organizations will hopefully become more flexible when it comes to changing their strategic goals and plans. Organizations will have to adapt to the new realities, which will require changing many of their habits and preferences.

In an economically adverse climate, donors are very much expected to take a more cautious stance on grant-making. That will likely lead to a decrease in the evaluation budgets, with pressures on price expected to appear. However, fees for evaluation work do not have much room to further go down after several years of steady decline, without compromising the quality of evaluation work.

With some travel restrictions expected to remain in place for a while, documentation trips will be more difficult, which will require more local resources and expertise. Hence, well-connected evaluation consultancies with access to experienced local experts to collect data and conduct interviews will be very much sought.

Methodology

Timeline of documented evaluations, breakdown by geography, 2009-2019

Year	Latin America	Asia Pacific	International	Europe	Africa	MENA	Eurasia	Total
2009			2	1		1		4
2010	2	2	1	2	1	2		10
2011	2	1	1	3	1		1	9
2012	2	2	1		1	2	1	9
2013	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	9
2014	3	2	1	2	4	1		13
2015	2	4	1	1	1	1	1	11
2016	2		2					4
2017			1	1	1		1	4
2018			1	1		1		3
2019			1					1

• Created with Datawrapper

This study is based on a total of 77 evaluation projects documented by the author during the period 2009-2019. [3] They included evaluations carried out or commissioned by partner organizations and grantees the author worked closely with as well as evaluations done or supervised by the author. All these evaluations were used for internal purposes.

The organizations whose evaluation work was analyzed in this report are an equal combination of media outlets and NGOs working on freedom of expression and journalism-related issues. Roughly two-thirds of the organizations were at some point in time grantees of the Open Society Foundations (OSF). The cases included in the study were selected from all over the world.

Location of documented organizations, breakdown by type of organization, 2009-2019

Region	NGO	Media outlet	Total
Latin America	7	8	15
Asia Pacific	6	7	13
International	7	6	13
Europe	8	4	12
Africa	5	6	11
MENA	4	4	8
Eurasia	3	2	5

• Created with Datawrapper

The methodology used in this study was a combination of direct observation (conducted mainly during the trips made by the author to visit grantees) and interviews and email exchanges with the organizations' representatives, as well as media or evaluation experts, conducted during the author's scoping visits or trips occasioned by launches of research projects and reports. Some of these exchanges extended over longer periods of time, sometimes of up to 4-5 years. In total, 115 individuals were consulted about the topics covered by this study.

Although this study covers the media development field, some of its recommendations can be used in evaluation of projects from other areas.

Marius Dragomir worked during the period 2004-2016 for the Open Society Foundations (OSF) Media Program, known as the Independent Journalism Program from 2014 on. As of 2016, Dragomir has been working for Central European University (CEU) where he is the head of the Center for Media, Data & Society (CMDS).

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