



**Vibrant Information
for Just, Prosperous, and Inclusive Societies**

COLLABORATORS

This paper is the result of the contributions of a number of colleagues and collaborators.

Aleks Dardeli saw the need for this undertaking and supported the development and evolution of the approach throughout the process. Tara Susman-Peña designed and led the research and development of the approach, and authored the paper. Aleks and Leon Morse gave incredibly helpful and insightful feedback on drafts. Leon has been a stellar sounding board, co-brainstormer and vital source of support. Jill Miller shepherded the work through several 'final' drafts and was a critical partner in teasing out the right structure and framing.

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Other IREX staff contributed in various ways: Ashley Ross helped design and facilitated a focus group of IREX veterans; Rajni Sood Laurent and Nathan Danielson helped design a human centered design workshop (Nathan facilitated); Aliza Appelbaum, Amber Ehrke, Lee Ann Grim, Tanvi Lal, Colby Pacheco, and Robbie Zabel conducted interviews of field staff. Tanvi also took endless notes and helped with logistics all around. Erin Murrock wrestled with a taxonomy of our work. All of the interviewers plus Charles Guedenet, Misha Mirny, Myles Smith, and of course Leon helped to brainstorm and synthesize what it all meant. About two dozen IREX staff provided feedback and ideas on drafts at various stages. Kristin Lord pushed us to better articulate the urgency of the approach as well as some key framing issues. Alex Cole and Josh Tong helped distill the long document to a short briefing (which was very valuable in helping to crystalize ideas).

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Executive Summary

IREX's **vision**: all people have the opportunities and abilities to build the vibrant information systems that are vital to a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world.

Three urgent challenges stand in the way of this vision:

1. Political and Economic Tides Turning in the Wrong Direction

- **Decrease in fundamental freedoms, shrinking civic spaces:** Governments are clamping down on political activism, freedom of expression and access to information.
- **Millions of people are still impoverished and lack opportunity:** Despite progress, poverty and inequality persist. Economic problems are compounded by a dearth of useful, timely, independent information for those who need it most.
- **Crisis of US politics and news media:** The crisis within the US news media has the potential to undermine the credibility of Western media models. Any media system can be vulnerable to backsliding.



Political and economic tides turning in the wrong direction

2. Digital Transformation

- **Rapid technological changes:** Change is a constant. Digital technology has upended traditional business models for news media. Data is proliferating, and digital security risks are widespread. Lies and truth are equally easy to produce and distribute.
- **Fundamental changes in the traditional media sector:** Lines are blurring between media and audiences, digital and broadcast media, and media and other sectors, rendering traditional approaches insufficient. Donor strategies have not kept pace with the changes.
- **Demand for new skills and resources:** Creators and consumers of information urgently need new skills and resources to succeed as journalism evolves. Facing avalanches of information, consumers (who are also potentially information producers) are poorly equipped to discern good from bad information.



Digital transformation

3. Insufficient Data, Research, and Analysis About How Best to Support Vibrant Information

- **Deficient understanding:** There is a lack of evidence as to why and how information and media have impact, and insufficient knowledge of what works in media development. Often we fail to put what we do know into practice.
- **Donor approaches stifle increased knowledge:** Implementers lack incentives to share learning and expose failures. A greater commitment is needed to understand and build on local need and demand.



Insufficient data, research, and analysis about how best to support vibrant information

The world of information and media today is radically different from two decades ago, when

IREX first pioneered a holistic approach to media sector development. The historical approach builds on our conception of four pillars of media development: professional journalism, sound business management of media outlets, a supportive legal enabling environment, and strong supporting institutions. However this approach needs to be refreshed so that we can design for an uncertain future.

IREX's new approach to building **Vibrant information systems** comes from an understanding of our history, together with insights from a broad review of our current and recent information and media work, with an important focus on current and future challenges, trends, and needs. It is fundamentally rooted in our broad experience in people-centered development. Our new approach pays special attention to the **opportunities** and **abilities** of traditional media, digital media, non-media institutions and individuals, to create, protect or maintain vibrant information, from generation to dissemination to engagement to action. By first listening to local partners, who understand their contextual challenges and own ambitions better than outsiders, we analyze, design, and carry out people-centered programs that increase **opportunities** and improve **abilities**.



Vibrant Information Systems

These include four key components:



Content that matters. Relevant, reliable information is an indispensable public good. Both individuals and institutions — people, journalists, media outlets, civil society organizations, businesses, and universities — must have the political freedom and necessary skills to create quality, fact-based content. People need to possess the skill to uncover and tell critical stories with data. Information actors, and journalistic media in particular, should be accountable for the information that they disseminate.



Multiple channels. Information flows must be unrestricted and unhindered, and content should be widely distributed through a diverse array of independent platforms that all individuals can access and know how to use. People should have access to the information they need and want. This includes access to their own personal data, as well as the data that matters to their communities.



Dynamic engagement. Those who read, listen to, and watch news and information need to have the critical thinking skills to discern facts from lies, propaganda and fake news. Individuals should be able to process the content, interact with it, discuss it, debate it, and share it with others. People must be safe— digitally, physically, and psychologically — throughout the process.



Transformative action. Individuals and communities need to have the right and ability to act freely upon the information they consume. They must be able to demand better services and challenge anti-democratic power structures that impede information generation, production, dissemination, access, consumption, or engagement.

The Approach to Vibrant Information is grounded in **a continual process of four core practices: listening, adaptive learning, knowledge gathering, and employing gender analysis.** These practices strengthen our approach to building Vibrant Information: **increasing opportunities** and **improving abilities.**

Increase Opportunities

- **Assess and leverage power dynamics.** Human capabilities cannot be improved without engaging in the often unequal forces of power that flow throughout human systems. We commit to gaining an understanding of the prevailing political and economic institutions and powers that affect information, the social and cultural norms, the resource constraints, and incentives, paying special attention to the relationships and power dynamics among different groups and individuals. This will allow us to surface hidden opportunities to support new champions, diffuse spoilers, and engage stakeholders with the greatest potential to advance open and vibrant information.
- **Prioritize strong human relationships.** Social trust is a critical, if complex factor affecting how information is transmitted, consumed, and used. We will continue to strengthen human relationships among information actors and stakeholders, whether journalists, bloggers, civil society, or businesspeople. As the foundation of people-centered development, human relationships are crucial to generating and disseminating content that matters and preserving rights. Strong human relationships increase the effectiveness of action so people can improve their own lives. We will also forge and leverage networks that form the backbone of civil society and social movements.
- **Analyze how information shapes people.** Information is also a vital force in forming individual and group identity (such as religious, ethnic, and gender identity) and providing meaning. We will always consider how information shapes emotions and the role of these emotions. Over time, these emotions affect decision-making. This broader perspective helps information actors be aware of what influences them and allows them to be effective at creating and sharing information.

Improve Abilities

- **Strengthen individual, organizational, and institutional performance.** We will continue to train, mentor, and develop journalists, bloggers, and other information actors to become effective storytellers and to safely engage in information and data exchange. We will support community-based organizations and newsrooms—including NGOs, public service organizations, and private outlets—to develop (1) journalistic, business, and organizational skills; (2) digital tools; and (3) offline mechanisms to use data for more effective participation and better decision-making about issues such as elections, health care, economic growth, and gender equality.
- **Grow interpretation skills.** We will train and mentor community-based teachers, carry out community activities, and produce community messages that educate people to critically absorb news and information so they can discern the difference between facts and propaganda. In doing so, we will build community demand for credible, useful information.
- **Teach service leadership.** We will empower empathetic leaders who effectively steward media organizations through economic and political disruption, who challenge and change power dynamics that impede the flow of quality information, and who teach the next generation values and skills to ensure that vibrant information systems endure.
- **Catalyze youth for positive action.** Investing in long-term change, we will start young, working with youth inside and outside school to increase their ability to generate, disseminate, engage with, and act on information.

Preparing for the Future

IREX's Approach to Vibrant Information will endow us with the ability to meet today's challenges and will help analyze the right approach to prepare for future challenges. To meet these challenges, we know that we need to embrace incipient technological, conceptual, and social change. Some change is positive, some is negative, but we cannot deny that things will continue to change. Thus, we must continually test our assumptions and grow our knowledge. IREX will pursue new research into future trends, ideas, and forecasts for information and media, as well as the skills and tools needed for them. We will set up monitoring systems to measure progress on the new approach. Finally, IREX will break into 'new' frontiers of working in the US, while remaining committed to our work in the rest of the world.

Introduction

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to define IREX's new approach to information with vibrant information systems. This will enable IREX to help partners and people generate, disseminate, consume, and use content that matters and take positive transformative action. The document provides the foundation for IREX program design, implementation, and technical products.

The Need for Vibrant Information Systems

IREX has been a pioneer in strengthening the quality, independence, and sustainability of the news media, as well as opening access to information, and pioneering work with digital media in close to 50 countries since the mid-1990s. In 2017, however, IREX is facing a very different world from the one that shaped our original approach to media development. Critical global trends are reshaping the world in which we work.

A Bit of History

Two decades ago, IREX pioneered a holistic media sector approach to media development



The Four Pillars of Media Development:
IREX's Historical, Holistic Media Sector Approach

in partnership with USAID, one of the sector's most significant donors globally. This approach was conceived in the context of post-communist democratization; Western donors believed that a strong independent media sector was a foundational element of a healthy democracy. The focus on strengthening the media sector was driven by the goals of improving journalistic outlets' ability to provide citizens with the information they need to make good decisions; hold government and other powerful entities to account; and represent the needs of the public to decision makers. Neither IREX nor USAID had much experience implementing media development programs when IREX won a large grant to execute a comprehensive program in multiple countries across Europe and Eurasia in the mid-1990s. IREX, collaborating with USAID, developed a concept based on Western ideals of what was needed for a well-functioning media system.

Over time, IREX developed the concept into four pillars of media development (which are really four pillars of a traditional media sector): professional journalism, sound business management of media outlets, a supportive legal enabling environment, and strong supporting institutions (relevant civil society such as journalism education, industry associations, and trade unions). These four pillars formed the basis of IREX's Media Sustainability Index (MSI). Begun in 2001, the MSI is the only existing index that attempts to measure media development holistically. The MSI includes another category, media plurality, which should result from a combination of high journalistic quality, sound media management, a good enabling environment and strong supporting institutions. Over the years, USAID has used the four pillars to inform programming, and relied on the MSI to measure progress in media development.

Since those early years, as we have matured our own ability to implement media development projects, IREX has become known for our thoughtful, careful, and steady approach to our media work. The yearly publication of the MSI, IREX's primary piece of thought leadership related to democratic governance over the last decade and a half, is a unique contribution among our competitors. Driven by core values that emphasize support to our partners with the aim of leaving them as self-sustaining, independent entities, IREX has focused on fostering the growth of local partners rather than seeking out the spotlight.

The holistic media sector approach continued to inform IREX's work even as the internet and digital technologies offered new platforms and increasingly wider access for people to create and share media, in addition to consuming it. The media sector began to undergo radical upheaval and donor priorities began to shift, but philosophically at least, our basic approach remained the same. IREX simply added new facets on top of the existing model: new geographic regions; media outlet exchange programs; smaller, niche projects including projects designed around training and enabling youth to create content; holistic security for journalists; building communications competency for Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). When circumstances made it impossible to adhere to the holistic media sector model (for example, when we worked in authoritarian regimes), we chose to leave parts out of our approach.

IREX has historically been highly responsive to donors; over the years this responsiveness seems to have calcified into a reactive stance. We have succumbed to what we have perceived to be the "reality of a donor-driven agenda" and have relied too much on our past successes. We have not adequately captured observations, insights, and innovations from the field or fed this learning into our practice. It is time to capitalize on our past successes and current knowledge to become forward-looking and knowledge-driven. It is time to identify and seize the opportunities made possible by the tremendous challenges of current economic and political upheavals and digital transformation. It is time for a new approach.

An Era of Urgent Challenges

We perceive there to be urgent challenges which fall into three broad categories, the most pressing factors today that IREX's new approach to information is designed to tackle. These broad categories are:

- Political and economic tides turning in the wrong direction
- Digital transformation
- A dearth of data, research, and knowledge about what works to improve information and media systems.

1. Political and Economic Tides Turning in the Wrong Direction

Decrease in fundamental freedoms, increase in closing spaces. Authoritarianism and populism are on the rise, the latter even in stable democracies. Globally, media freedom - which for a decade and half could be charted as a discouragingly flat line - has been declining in recent years. Our world has the largest youth population of all time, concentrated particularly in poor countries.

In the current era, most countries in the world have limited political will for information produced by external, independent media. In many cases, independent media face outright hostility, attempts to quash information production and distribution, and media capture by political and business interests is a widespread reality. Pressures against watchdog journalism are enormous. As a result, the ability to produce large scale high quality journalistic work has declined over the last decade, decreasing the media's ability to provide vital information and hold power to account.

Unfriendly enabling environments – the legal and regulatory framework, and supporting civil society institutions – have always been a structural challenge to making progress with media development. Low capacity within governments and low capacity in general due to poor economic development, is also a hindrance. In addition, in difficult economic circumstances, governments increasingly are finding excuses to be less open to free information and criticism of their performance. Propaganda wars undermine expectations that citizens should be able to turn to the media for fact-based, independent information.

Despite progress, millions of people are still impoverished and lack opportunity. Poverty and inequality persist and economic problems are compounded by a dearth of useful, timely, independent information for those who need it most. Poverty curtails access to relevant information even more severely (subscription periodicals, internet, and diverse cable channels are out of reach), such that people may rely on one kind of unreliable information (such as word of mouth). Another critical economic problem is that markets have failed to ensure healthy competition, and capitalistic markets have not ensured the survival of the best purveyors of information.

There is ever-greater need – and opportunity, due to increasing donor investment – in closing spaces, where international organizations like IREX are not welcome. In Eastern Europe, political will to create and sustain an independent media to hold politicians accountable

was incentivized by opportunities to join the EU, NATO, OSCE, WTO, and other such bodies. We haven't been able to identify similar incentives in Egypt and most other closing spaces. Unfortunately, many of the countries that at one point were incentivized to accept media support are now backsliding. Increasingly, governments are shutting out foreign NGOs. There are high security risks in closing spaces that multiply dangers and difficulties. All too many examples illustrate that democratic gains cannot be taken for granted; they are reversible, even in the most unexpected places.

The crisis of US news media and politics, featuring the post-truth economy. The increasingly fragmented, overloaded, and unreliable state of journalism and media literacy in the United States significantly contributed to the stunning presidential election results in late 2016. For two decades, media development has exported a Western-based model of journalism, tailored to local context. At this point in US history, and with the reconceptualization of global development as multidirectional and relevant to all countries, it is important that we both directly question this unidirectional dynamic and overtly recognize the fraught state of the US media that once served as our guide. The election season revealed that our own problems are many: mass media failed to both analyze the big picture and inform the public; transparently gave unqualified candidates quantifiably more attention to drive advertising revenue; and drew false equivalences between 'scandals' on both sides of the political spectrum that were not at all equivalent. The media failed to sufficiently hold power to account and failed to sufficiently identify and analyze patent falsehoods in political speech. Social media users relied increasingly on platforms for their news without understanding algorithms that insulated them from differing views. Nor did they understand how to filter propaganda and fake news from fact-based news. Post-election, many (though not all) US media quickly began to normalize the shocking results and the unprecedented pivot away from liberal democracy in the transition preparations.

This context raises a justifiable question: can a US-based organization still credibly engage in media development assistance abroad? In the current context, any information and media system is potentially subject to the vulnerabilities we identify here.

2. Digital Transformation

Rapid technological changes. The rapid pace of change catalyzed by digital technologies continues to be revolutionary. Digital technology has produced multitudes of new opportunities, giving birth to new media worlds, which vary starkly from country to country. At the extremes in the developed world, media are driven by interactivity, personalization, and overwhelming choice. In many places, digital technology creates openings for creating and sharing information in new and creative ways, at a very low financial cost. The advertising model for commercial print media has nearly collapsed. New ways to communicate and send messages have facilitated widespread protest movements and international recruiting for extremist groups. In the information age, it no longer makes sense to separate media development from information-focused assistance and yet definitions easily get too broad or too vague. Trying to understand the changes and the future of information more broadly while using technology in our work in ways that are appropriate and constructive are monumental, near-impossible tasks. Importantly, of course, technology also represents robust opportunity to create new channels of information. While technology alone will never be the solution, it will be an essential part of how we directly confront and potentially transform the other critical challenges we are facing.

Digital transformation, particularly over the last decade, has meant a deep, rapid, and ongoing transformation of the news media sector. Now it is no longer easy to draw lines between a media sector and the broader, complex, information-driven world. The media world of today is characterized by constant change and persistently unclear definitions: it is difficult to understand and impossible to pin down.

Digital transformation holds the promise that media production can rest in the hands of many; opportunities for consumption multiply and change form. While democratization of content production has developed quite unequally across the globe, nonetheless, the concept of “audience” has evolved significantly from two decades ago. A variety of people – not necessarily journalists – perform acts of journalism, while journalism itself is morphing.

Thanks to technology, data is rapidly proliferating, both as a by-product of digital use, and from various entities who collect it in increasing quest for evidence and understanding. “Free” use of digital platforms has a hidden cost to the user: companies collect a wealth of data tracking demographic information, usage, interests, location, and more. Digital data of all types may be growing by as much as 50% per year – dwarfing the ability of academics, governments, journalists, civil society, commercial entities, and individual citizens to understand and use it.

A troubling downside of widespread technology adoption is the exposure to surveillance and other digital security risks. Users of new technology are usually more adept at learning the technology to create and distribute content; protecting against digital vulnerabilities comes as an afterthought and is thus much harder to address. Organizations and individuals are vulnerable because digital security weaknesses are embedded in daily workflows and common practices that are so habitual as to be nearly invisible. Because habits are so ingrained and can appear to be natural, organizations often demonstrate resistance to adapting new workflows that would provide them more security. If management is not on board, change may be impossible. More generally, people have demonstrated that privacy in and of itself is not an incentive, and adopting security practices inspire ambivalence at best. Digital security realities change as constantly as digital technology. Often, cutting edge internet security tools do not adapt well to challenging or developing environments.

Fundamental changes in the traditional media sector, without a corresponding shift among approaches to media development assistance. This is connected to the technological changes but deserves a separate note. Historically, information systems have been conceived as a binary system consisting of product-driven media outlets that generated and distributed content, and individuals who consumed and made decisions based on it. Today, this division has eroded irreversibly. Even as traditional media and digital media outlets generate and disseminate content on multiple platforms, non-media institutions, such as think- tanks, universities, civil society organizations, businesses, and ideological groups, as well as individuals, now generate, consume, and interact with information in multiple and evolving ways.

The lines have been blurring rapidly between media and audience; digital and broadcast media; and the media sector and other sectors such as business and civil society. The democratization of media production (for those with access to technology, the internet, and some level of digital literacy) means that some portion of the “audience,” while still consuming media, are also curating, sharing, and producing media of various forms. Formerly single platform news media have increasing opportunities to experiment with form, share content with other producers, and potentially reach new audiences. In addition to media and citizens,

NGOs, activists and for-profit companies are making journalistic quality products. This does not mean that all of these actors have the same motivations or goals: there are many people performing acts of journalism; not all are journalists. New forms, such as solutions-oriented journalism, are arising in a fragmented and changing world. At the same time, fake news, propagandistic news, satire, and content written by bots are surging and flowing through information and media systems.

IREX has observed a resistance to acknowledging these shifts; indeed, an overall resistance to change among a significant proportion of media that we work with. For example, we have recently witnessed short-term thinking, narrow focus, and a lack of interest in building relationships or networks among news media organizations. How to motivate and incentivize responsible behavior and problem solving can be a challenge.

There are numerous challenges to the success of donor-supported information and media development. Some relate to internal issues – it is very difficult for donor-funded organizations to execute relevant, coordinated, high-quality programs with impact. Others are external challenges – since information and media is a cross-cutting phenomenon that penetrates many areas of society and individuals' lives, it is subject to a complex web of other influences. Both types of challenges to information and media development are well documented and analyzed elsewhere.¹ Donor support is shifting parallel to shifts in media: support to media sector-focused development programs has seen donor retrenchment in recent years. Currently, internet access and freedom, digital security, and working with data are among current donor interests, while what is called Countering Violent Extremism has surged to the forefront of media and communications-related priorities (despite scant evidence of the latter's efficacy).

Despite the increased emphasis on digital, donors and donor-funded organizations (we include ourselves in this) have been slow to match the new reality. For example, tech has undermined media business and we know there is no longer one unassailable business model for media. The business crisis has meant that mass media has weakened as an institution and made it more susceptible to control and capture. Yet, we still focus on sustainability despite this widespread uncertainty.

Donor-funded work means that donors set the agenda; however, what donors want does not always match what local populations want or what is needed. The clearest example of this has to do with donor budget cycles, which often plan what is needed far in advance, making it hard to adapt to new realities in real time. The long-term needs of communities and the need for long-term commitment to developing information and media systems do not align with the short-term budgets and mentality of donors. In terms of technical expertise, donors are often behind the curve in terms of understanding change and analyzing challenges. This is what led after the Arab Spring, to the wave of technological deterministic investments in jazzy digital solutions that did not directly address the problems which arose afterwards.

Given this mismatch, it can be tempting to do what is easier rather than what will promote change. For example, some projects call for training individuals, which is easy to arrange

¹ For example: Ellen Hume, "The Media Missionaries," Knight Foundation, 2004; Mark Nelson with Tara Susman-Peña, "Rethinking Media Development," *Internews* 2012; Susman-Peña, "Making Media Development More Effective," *CIMA* 2012 (see this document also for a more extensive list of literature analyzing the challenges of media development); Paul Rothman, "The Politics of Media Development," *CIMA* 2015

but which will not by itself impact institutions. Donors and implementers are increasingly prioritizing local leadership. Ethically, this is the right thing to do; however, experience demonstrates that transitions to local leadership often result in declining quality. In addition, there is plenty of need in countries that are not strategic priorities for donors or even in places that donors consider to have ‘graduated’ into middle-income status and are thus no longer eligible for assistance.² Need is even arising in donor countries such as the US.

A need for skills and resources to better equip journalists and other media makers – as well as consumers – for the future. Keeping pace with what is needed to confront changing media realities means performing ongoing analysis. Some gaps are clear; others will be revealed over time.

Understanding ‘the audience’ or ‘users’ has always been a challenge, with many media outlets distrusting audience research, not understanding it, or lacking the funds to conduct it. This understanding is increasingly hard in the current reality wherein the ‘audience’ can and does create and share content and performs occasional acts of journalism. Nonetheless, anticipating and responding to audience needs, building audience interest in vital topics, and adopting a stance to serve the public interest are all areas in which journalistic media can improve.

In the face of avalanches of information, consumers (who are also potentially information producers) are poorly equipped to discern good from bad information. The causes are many, ranging from deficits in education to high volumes of propaganda, fake news, and the like. But as quantities of poor quality information increase, people need better capacity to deal with information.

As journalism is becoming something that many people occasionally conduct, a lack of institutional support creates greater vulnerability. Journalists usually ask for training in hard skills; they want to have impact. It is harder to make a case for ‘soft skills,’ (such as critical thinking) but they are the foundation for journalists to use their hard skills. In addition, we have noticed that progress – in individuals, institutions, and even countries - can backslide, and often the cause of such regression is unclear.

As always, an increased understanding of journalistic ethics is needed but, given the blurring lines between journalism and media engagement - including phenomena such as advocacy journalism and journalistic-quality content produced by civil society organizations – the precise contours of journalistic ethics can be hard to articulate.

3. Insufficient Data, Research, and Analysis About How Best to Support Vibrant Information

Like the broader democratization field, information and media development has been tested by the difficulty of measuring and demonstrating impact. There is not enough understanding of why and how information and media have broader impact. We still lack enough evidence about what types of donor-supported interventions work, and under what conditions. At

² For example, Venezuela’s information system has been rapidly deteriorating but US investments in Latin America focus on the Northern Triangle. After US political interests shifted from Latin America after the ‘80s, the geographic region has received little media and information assistance compared to Afghanistan, Iraq, and other areas of political-military interest.

the same time, there is often a failure to apply the evidence that does exist, as the media development assessment literature reflects. The challenges to collecting better data, doing better research, and taking a knowledge-based approach are many; yet, the complexity of the media space and socio-political conditions demand better knowledge practices.

The relationships between donors and implementers are challenging and complex. Bound by a business model that makes it hard for them to help define agendas and areas of need, implementing organizations tend to get locked into reactive stances, following often politically driven priorities and chasing after grants, at times even when they believe that the program design is flawed or even potentially counterproductive. Even with the vogue in openly discussing (and even celebrating) failure, there is little incentive for IREX or any implementing organization to admit to failure, unless it is framed as a past challenge that has now been successfully overcome. This can make learning difficult, especially when openly sharing data and evaluations can put organizations in a weak position with respect to competitors – who in theory share similar big-picture goals, but in practice tussle over a small pot of money.

Beyond shortcomings in applying monitoring and evaluation data and lessons learned from practice on the ground, most existing research and evidence on information and media development has not had a powerful policy impact.³ There is much more work to be done; the positive impact of strong information and media systems on countries can be difficult to measure or demonstrate persuasively. Continual digital changes and innovations in media beg for agile research and analysis to keep pace. The digital age continues to yield data, but as a field we are not yet up to the task of analyzing it to help design and improve programming.

Critically, beneficiary populations' understanding of their problems, and how they frame their needs, can get underplayed or even lost in this dynamic. Donors and implementers have not committed deeply enough to knowledge-based design, and implementation in which local demand drives information and media development. Lastly, research, knowledge, and understanding are all essential to inform donor direction when there is a lack of demand, or even outright hostility to independent media on the ground.

³ See Tara Susman-Peña, "Making Media Development More Effective," CIMA 2012

IREX's New Approach to Vibrant Information

IREX's new approach is based on an understanding of our history, together with insights from a broad review of our current and recent information and media work, with an important focus on current and future challenges, trends, and needs.⁴ The new approach recognizes that the reality in our work has shifted from a defined world in which media historically were mainly professional journalistic content producers and information was the output – to a messier and less clearly defined world.⁵ It describes both the types of work that we do and the characteristics that make our work distinctly IREX.

Fundamentally, we believe that people need reliable, relevant information to be able to identify and solve their own problems, ask useful questions, and create a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities. We are convinced that a more informed citizenry will be able to demand accountability, effect positive, democratic change, and build better lives for themselves. People need access to information, but they also need to be able to understand, critically assess, create, share, and use information. The quality of information is important but so too is the medium in which it is delivered. Engaging with information and media is not a purely instrumental act; it is an experience. The experience of engaging with media – whether it's listening to local radio news together with family members, watching a virtual-reality film on a smartphone, or any other way we might interact with information – helps people to define who they are and to derive meaning from the world around them. A focus on information alone is not enough. A **focus on people** and their need and ability to interact with information in productive ways is core to IREX's new Approach to Vibrant Information.

As this Approach to Vibrant Information is a prototype, we anticipate that it will evolve over time as it makes contact with reality.

What Vibrant Information Should Look Like in the Digital Age

Vibrant information systems should include four interconnected components that create vital flows of information: people create **content that matters**, which is distributed through **multiple channels**, people access that information with a **dynamic engagement**; this process leads to **transformative action**.

Content that matters. Relevant, reliable information is an indispensable public good. Individuals and institutions – people, journalists, media outlets, civil society organizations, businesses, and universities – should have the political freedom and necessary skills to create quality, fact-based content. People will possess the skill to uncover and tell critical stories with data. A diverse range of people - including marginalized populations – will have a voice. Information actors and particularly journalistic media will be accountable for the information that they disseminate.

Multiple channels. Information flows should be unrestricted and unhindered, with content widely distributed on a diverse array of independent platforms that all individuals can access and know how to use. People should have access to the information they want and need,

⁴ The methodology for data collection that informs this Approach is in Annex A.

⁵ We are comfortable with leaving the terms 'information' and 'media' vaguely defined and somewhat interchangeable, as that reflects the current reality we live in. IREX will remain attentive and ready to refine our definitions as new realities emerge.

including their own personal data, and the data that matters to their communities.

Dynamic engagement. Those who read, listen to, and watch news and information should have the critical thinking skills to discern facts from lies, propaganda, and fake news and information. Individuals will process the content, comment and interact with it, and discuss, debate, and share it with others. People should be safe – digitally, physically, and psychologically – throughout the process.

Transformative action. Individuals and communities should have the right and ability to act freely upon the information they consume, such as organizing to demand better services and challenging anti-democratic power structures that are closing the space for civil society.

Work in information and media development has always had an underlying assumption that good information is a critical part in a process that leads to action with positive results. While of course information is the backbone of decisions, it should also lead to action. We believe that it is important to articulate this intention, even if it is not possible to understand or control all of the elements that lead to that action. Ultimately, vibrant information is critical not only so that people can make better decisions, but also so they are able to **act effectively to improve their lives.**

Principles Behind Our Commitment to Vibrant Information

IREX's Approach to Vibrant Information is and will be fundamentally rooted in our **broad experience in people-centered development.** We respect the value of all people, and consider people to be the primary agents of their own development.⁶ In addition to our rich history in media development, IREX has long worked to strengthen civil society, improve education, engage and empower youth, and nurture leaders. We will draw on this experience to foster people, communities, and ultimately, institutions,⁷ so that they are prepared to acquire, adapt and build on technical knowledge for strong and vibrant information. Vibrant information in turn will support stronger democracy and enable people to nurture their own development.⁸

IREX's great strength is in our ability to **improve human capability to drive development.** Our approach pays special attention to the **opportunities** and **abilities** of traditional media, digital media, non-media institutions and individuals to create, protect, or maintain vibrant information, from generation to dissemination, to engagement to action. While abilities are the talents, skills or proficiency to do something, opportunities are the powers or freedoms

⁶ IREX recognizes that humanity is not homogenous, and is inclusive of a diversity of gender, age, ethnicity, and particularly all marginalized populations.

⁷ "Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction. They are made up of formal constraints (rules, laws, constitutions), informal constraints (norms of behavior, conventions, and self-imposed codes of conduct), and their enforcement characteristics. Together they define the incentive structure of societies and specifically economies." (Douglass North, 1993) Institutions define how an economy functions and its incentive structure; in turn, these factors shape the progress, stagnation, or decline of human development.

⁸ It is not the intention to get overly immersed in definitions or theory here, but it is worth noting that in developing our new approach, we have found inspiration and good ideas in several schools of thought. We are particularly grateful to the thinkers and practitioners who have nurtured and amplified these schools of thought: human capabilities; systems thinking; new institutional economics; human and institutional capacity development; and belief, action, outcome model. Our overall framework draws particularly on the human capabilities approach, which was built on the work of Amartya Sen. Sen defines development as freedom, and argues that it is rooted in what people value, means people have choices to pursue what they value, and they have agency; their action leads to change.

IREX's Civil Society approach is driven by local systems thinking. We employ adaptive management, adjusting to complex changing circumstances throughout the life of projects. Political economy analysis informs decisions on program design and how to adapt over time. Emphasis on local knowledge, thinking from multiple perspectives, and being learning-driven is highly aligned with IREX's Approach to Vibrant Information.

that are legally and also effectively available to use that ability. By first listening to local partners, who understand their challenges and ambitions better than outsiders, we analyze, design, and carry out people-centered programs that increase **opportunities** and improve **abilities**.

Undergirding these principles are four core practices: **listening, adaptive learning, knowledge gathering and sharing,** and **employing a gender lens.**

The Four Core Practices

1. Listening: Starting from realities on the ground, listening will define all of IREX's work, from governance to education. From the inception of our media work, IREX has always prioritized understanding local needs, seeking a grassroots understanding of problems, as well as standing outside the spotlight and emphasizing the success of our partners above all else. This means listening to and trying to understand citizens and communities, in particular women and marginalized groups. These are the priority needs that information systems should be designed to address. In working with media, we are committed to true partnerships, and to ensuring that our partners take ownership of and have a voice in key decisions.

The literature clearly shows that outsider-driven prescriptive, technocratic approaches are what have led to dramatic failures in development. We acknowledge that our expertise has gaps: we do not know everything. Thus IREX prioritizes listening first to communities, local partners, and beneficiaries.

2. Adaptive learning: An underlying principle that will define how we develop Vibrant Information systems is as a **living and evolving practice** driven by **adaptive learning**. We know that we will likely not understand everything from the beginning, and we are certainly going to encounter unanticipated challenges along the way. Particularly now, in this time of great change, it is vitally important to continually take stock of progress, be alert for forces that will influence the effectiveness of our work, and be able to adapt as necessary. A mindset of constant reflection, questioning, seeking, and analysis is central to this learning culture. We integrate feedback across our activities, as a natural part of the process. Being learning-driven means being humble: we know that we don't know all the answers. We know we will make mistakes. We start by listening, and we will continue to listen.

On a macro level, we will employ initial and periodic analyses of the environment our partners operate in and the forces that promote progress as well as those that impede it. For example, political economy analysis helps reveal power dynamics across actors and institutions as well as incentives. Risk assessments and risk mapping help us understand specific digital, physical, and psycho-social threats to journalists' performance and help to mitigate them. On a micro level, our programs will rely on an initial and periodic analysis of the organizations and individuals we support, in terms of their ability to deliver desired results, and to determine what needs improvement. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation, as well as an analytical mindset seeking performance improvement, should provide regular data to inform adjustments and update on progress. We want to ensure that our partners are resilient, able to adapt to changing media and information environments as necessary.

Technology is an integral part of our work, and has the potential to help connect more people, enable more people to share ideas, and to reshape the world around us for the better. However, experience demonstrates that when technology is presented as a solution, money

Don't Forget the "L"

*M&E is never an exercise in compliance or box checking for IREX. We value Monitoring, Evaluation AND Learning (MEL) and integrate it into programming, using it as a feedback tool that helps us improve. For example, the **Ukraine Media Partnership Project** together with the **Georgia Media Partnership Project** designed an M&E tool to better understand how partners are using new skills and ideas. Neither donor (the respective US Embassies) previously required M&E; subsequently both donors have embraced the tool and the learning approach it enables.*

and time will be wasted without positive effects; and harm may even be done. Thus, our approach to technology will be fundamentally learning-driven. We will continually observe and experiment with evolving technology to ensure that it can contribute to powerfully delivering stories and we can effectively scale what works.

We will strive to be part of critical intellectual conversations about information and media development, and keep abreast of important trends such as complexity theory, thinking and working politically, and design thinking. These conceptual trends are part of the current zeitgeist, but what is valued will change and even transform over time. Taking a learning approach to our work means we don't have to identify wholly with any new trend that will eventually become outdated. Participating in an ongoing process of reflection and improvement will help keep us focused on what is effective in producing a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world.

We also know that external forces, beyond our control, may sabotage our progress on several levels. For example, work with a media organization to improve management, quality content, reach and engagement, may result in the outlet being taken over by the government or sold to a politicized business-person who wishes to leverage the outlet's improved capabilities. A donor may abruptly decide to no longer invest in the media of a country where progress was on the rise. An authoritarian government may sabotage efforts, directly or indirectly. Economic upheaval may upset business models. The possibilities are endless. Being field- and learning-driven will not prevent any of these dismal possibilities. However, we have found that a grassroots, learning approach best supports building resilience, helping to withstand shocks and enabling productive transformation in the face of sudden change.

3. Knowledge gathering and sharing: We will bring the commitment, capacity, and resources needed to emphasize listening, learning, and gathering and sharing knowledge. This is built from our two decades of experience, technical expertise, analytical skills, knowledge base of systems thinking, and an ability to cross-fertilize questions, ideas, knowledge, and tools with our IREX colleagues who have deep experience in communities and governance, leadership, education, and youth. Our longstanding commitment to monitoring and evaluation supports not just accountability, but developing a knowledge base that feeds back into the practice, and allows us to course-correct, improve, create more effective program design, and most importantly, magnify our effectiveness and impact.

IREX's Media Sustainability Index (MSI) has contributed deep and detailed knowledge to the media development field at large for over 15 years. We are beginning a refresh of the MSI that will reflect the new framework of our Approach to Vibrant Information, so that it can continue to be a uniquely relevant tool. In addition, IREX's newly formed Center for Applied Learning and Impact – with a focus on generating and supporting learning; generating practical recommendations, measuring impact, and developing innovative products – signals a long-term institutional commitment to research, impact assessment, and knowledge generation.

None of this knowledge gathering matters if it is not put into practice. IREX is committed to sharing what we have learned, to contribute to better effectiveness of information and media development work generally. We actively seek out feedback and collaboration, as well as ways to share and disseminate our knowledge products. We are committed to continually improving our ability to apply what we have learned in practice. Development attempts to solve tough problems. Working with local actors as a resource and as collaborators, IREX draws on data, research, and analysis to more effectively define and frame problems, and identify and build

PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS:

before IREX begins an information project, we ask some initial questions:

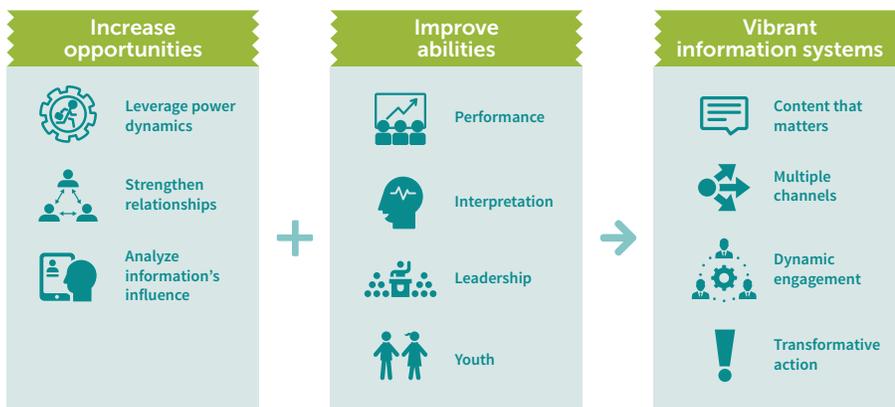
1. How do the affected people identify their needs? How do they define the problem? What can we learn by listening and observing?
 2. Can the problem be solved? Is international support needed?
 3. How can we build a project based on a learning approach?
 4. What support does the target community need to be able to fully participate?
 5. What are the critical information gaps that impede the target community's development?
 6. What are the gaps in our own knowledge?
 7. What are the underlying incentives and behaviors that need to be altered or re-shaped?
-

on the most effective solutions. In this way, we seek to integrate problem-solving processes into local environments.

4. Employing a gender lens. Throughout all of our work, we will continue to employ a critical gender lens to increase opportunities and improve abilities. Because IREX's experience demonstrates that gender inequality is one of the major impediments to development, we employ gender analysis across all of our information and media work. Our Gender Assessment Tool ensures that we apply and improve upon best practices for equal inclusion of women and LGBT people as information and media producers and consumers. Our Media Content Analysis Tool helps track, assess, and improve upon gender representation within media content.

IREX's Vision

By increasing people's opportunities and improving their abilities, it is possible to build the vibrant information systems that are vital to a more just, prosperous, and inclusive world.



Increasing Opportunities

Leverage power dynamics. Opportunities cannot be improved without engaging with the often unequal forces of power that flow throughout human systems. We commit to gaining an understanding of the prevailing political and economic institutions and powers that affect information, the social and cultural norms, resource constraints and financial, social and cultural incentives. We will pay attention to the relationships, distribution and dispute of power among different groups and individuals, finding all opportunities formally and effectively available to advance open and vibrant information. We believe that it is critical to understand power dynamics to be able to identify obstacles, as well as sometimes-hidden pockets of change and innovation, and thus, leverage points. While this can be difficult (particularly if there is no donor support for such analysis), it is important to try to yield at least a minimum understanding of the factors that might support or prevent the success of an intervention.

Just because you know doesn't mean you act; the main challenge to taking new actions, research has found, is not in the mind. People need incentives, social support, and evidence that their actions will have an impact. In particular, IREX recognizes the need to understand the underlying motivations that shape individual and collective behavior. To support change that brings about long-term benefits, we need to be able to understand, shape, leverage, or alter incentives. We must analyze how incentives align with institutions, trends, and power dynamics.



WE WILL:

- Conduct political economy analysis
- Conduct resource control and distribution analysis
- Study markets, financial flows, and rent-seeking behaviors
- Analyze drivers of change
- Map power
- Analyze social networks
- Analyze costs and benefits of potential activities to stakeholders, including assessing the cost of complying/not complying with formal or informal rules
- Leverage champions of reform
- Leverage national, regional and international commitments
- Empower partners to undertake advocacy for stronger laws and better regulations

Strengthen relationships. The IREX approach will build on the premise of participatory communications: to create common ground across groups of people through dialogue and debate, build shared understanding and goals, and thus strengthen communities. Information – facts, events, even analysis – is central to this process, and yet is useless without strong, trusted connections between and among people. **We undertake to think from the perspective of communities** rather than starting with information, tools, or infrastructure. Critical to this perspective: we will strengthen human relationships among information actors and stakeholders. As the foundation of people-centered development, human relationships are crucial to the generation and dissemination of content that matters, and preservation of rights. They increase effective action so that people can improve their own lives. We will also forge and leverage networks - relying on and building trust between stakeholders - that form the backbone of civil society and social movements. Strong ties, networks, and shared experiences are foundational qualities for communities; they are also increasingly fundamental to effective journalism and media curation, which in the new media reality requires collaboration and coordination. IREX will emphasize interaction with the communities that information-producing organizations serve. These interactions will help organizations to be more responsive to people's information needs.

Our work should always prioritize relationship-building and finding commonalities across (sometimes antagonistic) groups of people, to create trust, better synergy, and a sense of shared goals and to create opportunities to exchange ideas, questions, and plans. We are committed to working across and helping to coordinate diverse types of groups, for example: community radio, multimedia startups, mainstream media, civil society organizations, government, academia, youth, private sector, libraries, and others. We will build solidarity across journalists who typically compete with each other.

IREX believes that relationship-building will mean building bridges across people who inhabit information bubbles (whether or not they realize it) and are becoming more and more apart from people whose views and interests do not match their own. This means building trust, empathy, and a willingness to hear others' perspectives. Understanding how to best bridge these polarized mediated divides will require new research and knowledge-building.

Incentives to persist: Serbia

Our support to a local association in Serbia has helped it evolve to create and run a national tracker; monitoring both laws that impact the media and attacks on the media. The value that this work created for the organization's members became an incentive for the organization to persist with the work and seek additional funding. To this day, several years after the conclusion of the IREX grant, the organization continues to monitor the media and its environment.

Increase opportunities

Leverage power dynamics



Strengthen relationships



Analyze information's influence

Strong relationships need trusted spaces in which people can connect and nurture relationships and shared bodies of knowledge. For example, we already support libraries to become spaces of digital inclusion, where people who are often excluded - such as women, the elderly, and youth - can seek and share information. We have initiated Media Centers that provide intensive, high quality education in multi-media production for journalists. We have also created safe digital spaces, providing journalists with resources for digital, physical, and psycho-social well-being, so they can work more effectively. We commit to providing media and civil society organizations with risk analysis, management, and mitigation so that they can create safe spaces for their employees, even in difficult circumstances.

Prioritizing relationships naturally extends to how we work with partners, demonstrating our commitment, listening, and building trust over time. When we select partners, we always seek organizations that exhibit trustworthiness, motivation, thirst for learning and improving, and passion. We see our greatest successes working with people and organizations that want to learn, grow, and make a difference. As much as possible, we will seed long-term relationships with our partners and plan to engage over the long term with program alumni.

WE WILL:

- Create and strengthen coalitions and networks
- Build ties and alliances with media research organizations, civil society, technology innovators, and the private sector
- Create and protect spaces of trust, even in extremely challenging environments
- Convene disparate groups to come together and exchange knowledge, build trust, and solidify relationships

Analyze information's influence. IREX will always try to understand the whole information system in addition to the connections among its different parts. This means that one component (such as propaganda) may come into focus while other components of the system are less emphasized. Nonetheless, we will actively analyze the relationships among the various components of the system.

Access to information is the critical first step in any aspect of building vibrant information. Access is a multi-faceted concept, which includes infrastructure (e.g. What platforms are available? Is there electricity?), economics (e.g. How much does information cost? What is done from the profits of its sale?), legal structures (e.g. What is allowed? What is the consequence of breaking the law?), social aspects (e.g. Is it in a language people understand? Are there cultural norms that prevent some groups from seeking or obtaining information?), just to name a few examples. Access to information is foundational to a central principle of media development: that people need information to help them make decisions that will improve their lives and their communities. Access does not equal development, however, and the relationship between information, decisions, and results is quite complex. Access is critical, but access to information alone won't lead to positive social change.

Therefore, we believe that it is time to evolve this often-repeated central tenet of media development: people need information to help them make decisions that will improve their lives and their communities.

Building new relationships: Liberia Civil Society and Media Leadership Program

After Liberia's civil war, new media outlets and civil society organizations (CSOs) mushroomed into a new space for entrepreneurial and activist efforts. While many successful organizations grew out of this period, the majority were not professional, cooperative, or interconnected, and a gulf of mistrust grew up between media and civil society.

Through numerous planning meetings, events, and conferences, IREX brought community radio (CR)—which lives at the intersection of media and civil society—together with CSOs. CSOs helped build CR capacity. CRs began to cover the CSOs' issues. CRs and CSOs began to see each other as critical to their own survival. Through sustained effort, we helped to build mutual understanding and the sense of a shared mission: serving their communities.



**So how might we create the best conditions for people to process information so that it leads to constructive action?**

Information can only lead to constructive action if people are able to interact with, process the information, and use it wisely. Processing information is relational: relationships, belonging, interactions among people, and transactions shape how information is processed. Processing information includes the ability for individuals and communities to: ask questions; inform themselves and others; explain ideas; present a compelling argument; be capable of discerning fact from opinion; debate freely and fairly; analyze; synthesize. Processing information is not linear, either. At any time during the decision/action process, people of course may go back and seek additional information that in turn may reshape that process. Without incentives for people to make use of it, information has no power and can change nothing. People need motivation to make decisions, and motivation and ability to act based on those decisions. They act based on a desire to see results that will lead to change. People act out of emotion – not just based on factual information – and we can be sure that few decisions and actions are ever purely rational. People also act out of ingrained habits. It may be impossible to ever fully understand how, why, and when each of these influences leads to different types of action (or inaction). However, we believe that the inquiry into this process will be vital to producing a more vibrant information system.

Information is a vital force in forming individual and group identity and providing meaning. People engage with media to derive information, but also to have an experience, to gain meaning and to build understanding of themselves. The experience of information, as well as shared or conflicting narratives, are vital building blocks of individual and group identity. We should consider how information shapes emotion and the role of this emotion and other non-rational factors in decision-making, forming connections with others, and taking action. This broader perspective helps information actors understand what is most important to their well-being. It also helps them be aware of what influences them, allows them to share learning and questions such as data and safety concerns, and support and motivate each other.

When IREX's **SAFE** (Securing Access to Freedom of Expression) project teaches digital security, we emphasize a basic logical understanding of what the risks are and how technology works, rather than focusing on select tech tools. This empowers people to understand and make choices, rather than just follow rules.

WE WILL:

- Diagnose access to information
- Map relationships and interactions
- Identify research (such as audience and user research) and integrate it into implementation projects
- Assess group dynamics
- Employ political economy analysis to understand flows of power and resources, and identify incentives to increase aid effectiveness
- Perform ongoing broad research on important questions around vibrant information
- Practice human centered design to focus on identifying and framing problems and building solutions collaboratively with those most affected by the problems
- Partner with local experts and academics to build contextual understanding and analysis

Improving Abilities

Performance. Rather than focus on building numerous capacities without asking “capacity to what end?” IREX will emphasize strengthening individual, organizational, and institutional performance.⁹ We believe we understand how to identify the most promising information organizations and actors – spanning regional multimedia to national television, to rural community radio, to civil society organizations, to unorthodox and entrepreneurial startups and beyond – and help them to diagnose and create a plan to address their greatest weaknesses within their local context. Our focus on strengthening media should be on driving toward their independence, meaning they are credible, ethical, able to work openly and without fear, and have sufficient ability to define and produce stories that make a difference in their communities. Independence means that media have sufficient resources to hold power to account – whether government, business, or another form. IREX should help ensure that information organizations are well managed and that their revenue sources facilitate their survival but do not put limits on what they are able to report. We also focus on how they will survive after our involvement.

We will continue to train, mentor, and develop journalists, bloggers, and other information actors to become effective storytellers and to safely engage in information and data exchange. We will support community-based organizations and newsrooms – including NGOs, public service, and private outlets - to develop journalistic, business, and organizational skills. We will also support them to develop digital tools; and offline mechanisms to use data for more effective participation and better decision making about issues such as elections, healthcare, economic growth, and gender equality. IREX will work with journalists and other information actors to better access, structure, and analyze data to build stories that have impact. Data has the potential to benefit citizens, but few have the necessary skills. Thus, we should also work to better equip communities, civil society organizations, and citizens with the skills and tools to verify the quality of data, process it, and leverage it for their benefit—for example, to improve the services they receive from public institutions. We should also help people more effectively demand the data that they want and which are most relevant to them.

Changes in the role of the audience (and challenges in understanding this reality) will go hand in hand with the technology revolution and the rise of the information society. We should increase our partners’ analytical abilities to determine appropriate ways that technology can solve problems and create new opportunities. Without prioritizing any single technology, we do emphasize the power and relevance of mobile platforms. While we cannot predict the future, we can design and prepare for the future; our primary strategy in this near impossible task is to prepare our partners to embrace the changing media system, and take needed measures to adapt to its challenges and opportunities.

Media organizations also need sound ability to operate so that they can process information. This includes business management, marketing, advertising, and entrepreneurship. It also includes audience and market research to help media make business decisions. We will continue to analyze how organizations are using their resources and help to optimize them.

While training is a vital component of our work, we should never assume that accurate, useful information transmitted by knowledgeable experts will be enough to improve skills, and thus

⁹ IREX has developed Performance Improvement Principles: Achievement, Sustainability, Trust, Multi-Level Lens, Inclusion, Flexibility, and Learning and Adaptation.



improve performance. Our design of training curricula and methodology should be driven by research-based principles on how different types of learners learn best. We will pay attention to people's mindset and value willingness to learn. Our focus on relationship building will enable us to take the long view, incorporating individual mentoring over time, as needed, to build and refresh skills and better address how to apply skills to real world problems. Our ongoing emphasis on local realities means that we will be able to adapt to new circumstances as they arrive.

Beyond capacity building, we will focus on **improving organizational performance** that can be measured by what it produces and its impact.

WE WILL:

Improve performance

- Diagnose and co-create roadmaps for media and other organizations for better institutional performance
- Improve management and operations of media organizations and outlets
- Instill business resilience, emphasizing appropriate business models, in-depth management skills, understanding the market, adaptability, and entrepreneurial innovation
- Spur innovation of business models to promote independence and longevity

Build journalistic skills to support achievement

- Improve journalistic content on broadcast, print, radio, and a range of digital and multimedia platforms
- Increase journalists' skills and impact
- Grow and improve the practice of investigative journalism within countries and across borders
- Help provide better access, and the skills to clean, structure, and analyze data to build stories that have impact
- Teach and instill ethics in journalists, citizen journalists, media organizations, and media outlets
- Strengthen editorial capacity to produce relevant, vital information
- Improve journalists' ability to report on specific topics, such as elections, gender-based violence, biodiversity, and climate change
- Create tools that educate journalists and other media practitioners
- Educate media, civil society, and individuals to use social media for journalistic purposes
- Provide resources and build skills for journalists' digital, physical, and psycho-social well-being

Support the broader environment

- Build capacity for local organizations to advocate for and monitor laws that improve information flows, access to information, and freedom of expression
- Provide local partners with resources and expertise to write laws that support good information flow
- Improve governments' ability to usefully provide information to media and citizens

- Help establish and build journalist and media associations
- Improve CSOs' capacity to communicate with their constituents, the media, and the government

Emphasize inclusion

- Prioritize work with underserved communities, such as women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities
- Conduct audience and user research; set up media ratings systems; teach media outlets to interpret and use ratings and research to build loyalty and value
- Transform libraries into modern information hubs providing information access to all, particularly marginalized communities

Focus on the future

- Create apps and digital tools to deliver information in innovative, relevant ways
- Incentivize and develop local media entrepreneurship to fill information gaps
- Create new opportunities for journalism, e.g. support innovative news startups, design mobile multimedia production studios, produce events that provide media with content
- Create and manage cross-border networks of media that support technical development, business innovation and advocacy
- Build communities' digital literacy
- Perform both foundational and cutting-edge research on media and information topics
- Conduct digital risk analysis and perform risk mitigation for organizations

Interpretation. We will help build information-savvy societies that produce reliable information, are able to discern the difference between reporting and propaganda, and demand and seek out fact-based journalism. This new commitment to interpretation will signal a significant departure from IREX's and others' past framing of media sector development. Our level of emphasis recognizes both the changing, multidirectional nature of content creation, sharing, and processing today, and also our commitment to supporting all people as the protagonists of their own development.

We will train and mentor community-based teachers, carry out community activities, and produce community messages that educate people to critically absorb news and information. This enables media and citizens to pressure governments and other powerful institutions to be more transparent and accountable for their actions. They will then become better equipped to produce and seek out responsible, evidence-based reporting.

WE WILL:

- Use principles and techniques from human centered design to plan appropriately for context, give stakeholders ownership over the process, and adapt as needed
- Build critical thinking and media analysis skills for media, diverse communities, and individuals



- Work with a range of stakeholders, including youth and the elderly, with an emphasis on women and marginalized populations, in both traditional and non-traditional learning settings
- Create educational materials and tools in a range of formats, from traditional television Public Service Announcements to cutting edge digital games
- Equip communities, civil society organizations, and citizens with the skills and tools to verify the quality of data, process it, and leverage it for their benefit
- Research the effectiveness of our methodology, what may be done to improve it, and how it may be adapted to other contexts

Leadership. We will instill **service leadership**.¹⁰ This will empower leaders who: effectively steward media organizations or communities through economic and political disruption; challenge and change power dynamics that impede the flow of quality information; and teach the next generation values and skills to ensure vibrant information systems endure in the future.

Across all IREX programming,¹¹ we should take a highly effective approach to developing leaders. This starts with identifying the right people. Identifying leaders means more than prioritizing skill or initial success. We will focus on change makers who question apparent limits, are fully committed to their work, and are effective at making things happen even in incredibly challenging circumstances, including journalists, activists, entrepreneurs, and influential executives. We will seek people who are honest about their own and their organizations' challenges and failings. Our work with people prioritizes developing leadership at all levels of production, sharing, and consumption of media and information.

Once we identify the right candidates, we will focus on increasing their leadership, technical abilities, and organizational management skills. Leadership skills include teaching critical thinking, so that people can solve problems. IREX's approach to growing leaders focuses on increasing people's confidence, ability to share knowledge, and support of community growth. Through constructive feedback, we will motivate improvement. As a member of the IREX SAFE team in the MENA region put it, "We teach self-value. Loss of self-value leads to radicalization in such an environment where people are vulnerable."

Technical skills related to media and information are a key part of instilling media leadership. Leadership includes taking technical skills and problem solving one step further, and using a problem as an opportunity for entrepreneurship. Lastly, organizational and management skills are an important part of leadership, so that leaders represent and improve their organizations and communities. We will put a priority on democratic leadership, with a constant inquiry into how community is part of the process of development.

¹⁰ Service leadership is also referred to as "servant leadership." IREX's definition of servant leadership draws on the 10 characteristics identified by Larry Spears, CEO of the Greenleaf Center of Servant Leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

¹¹ Leadership development is found across IREX Leadership, Youth, Education, and Communities & Governance practices, in addition to the Information & Media practice. Currently, the Leadership practice is engaging in stock-taking, reflection, and codifying the IREX Leadership approach; the approach to information will work to stay aligned.



IREX's **Mozambique Media Strengthening Program** cultivates leaders in various ways. Community radio (CR) leaders receive intensive training, mentorship, and networking focused on leadership skills such as conflict resolution, human resource and financial management, and staff development and retention.

We designate key people in CR networks to lead their peers in embracing coverage of gender issues, for example. Some are trained as assistant trainers.

Young urban journalists in the Media Lab also hone leadership skills, such as planning and executing press events and coaching their peers.

We have specific technical expertise in education, in addition to decades of experience in providing training and learning opportunities to widely diverse populations of youth and adult learners in a range of subjects. We know that sharing good information is not enough; authentic learning requires a particular set of conditions and intentional design. This approach not only ensures that true learning occurs, but also better connects with what incentivizes people to new action. When designing curricula, we will follow principles of adult learning, and adapt when working with youth, while tailoring each curriculum to local reality. We will remain flexible and shift our method as needed. A key component of this method will be practical, hands-on learning that will be built into the workflow whenever possible.

WE WILL:

- Identify current and future leaders of all ages with both talent (whether nascent or developed) and an interest in improving themselves and lifting their communities
- Provide skills to grow individuals with leadership potential into powerful, effective community leaders
- Develop individuals and media institutions as community leaders
- Emphasize an interactive, collaborative approach
- Provide rich experience exchanges with other leaders, both nationally and internationally, to promote learning and network-building
- Support content creation to inform new and established leaders

Youth. We will start young, working with youth wherever they are, to increase their ability to generate, disseminate, engage with, and take action on information.

Youth are pioneering the evolution of much of the new reality in information and media. The world's youth population – currently at 1.8 billion, with 85% living in developing and emerging economies and fragile states – is consuming and producing content, exercising its voice, and activating change like never before. To bolster positive developments in information systems, it is vital to stay connected to this driving force.

IREX's focus on youth means that we understand that youth are different from adults – they access information differently, have different priorities, and respond to different incentives. While youth are of course not a homogenous group, overall they are motivated by having their voices and opinions taken seriously and the opportunity to have an impact on society. Thus we should tailor our work with youth to ensure youth engagement and empowerment in information systems. We will enable youth to participate in energizing activities with their peers, and to build information skills that they will perceive as marketable in the employment market. We will help institutions and their adult leadership find new and effective ways to engage youth in constructively creating and consuming content and exercising their voices.

IREX will take a positive youth development (PYD) approach to working with youth and information – co-creating with youth to increase opportunities for learning, development, leadership, positive relationships, and community engagement.



WE WILL:

- Elevate youth voices through multimedia initiatives incorporating video competitions, debates, presentations, and crowdsourcing
- Educate youth as multimedia journalists while building strong peer networks
- Train youth to create media pieces and use those pieces to facilitate community dialogue
- Strengthen university journalism programs
- Help youth become media entrepreneurs
- Build critical thinking, discernment, and analysis skills for youth content consumption and creation
- Build data literacy and a demand for relevant data
- Leverage social media for engagement

Overall, this Approach to Vibrant Information finds the **opportunities** and **abilities** within the critical challenges we have identified:

- Political and economic tides turning in the wrong direction
- Digital Transformation
- Insufficient data, research and analysis about how best to support vibrant information.

It readies us to design and implement for an unknown future.

Preparing for the Future

Meeting the Challenges

IREX believes that our Approach to Vibrant Information will provide a framework, ideal values, and guiding principles from which to combat the urgent challenges that we face and will help us analyze the right approach for future challenges.

Looking Ahead

Our research identified a number of trends and signals of the future. While nothing is certain, we know that we can never again design projects based solely on past ideas about the media. We need to become better observers of incipient change and more nimble in incorporating opportunities – whether technological, conceptual, or social – brought by this change. To help reorient our design approach, IREX will pursue new research into future trends, ideas, and forecasts about the future of journalism, information, and media, as well as the skills and tools needed to meet this ever-changing future.

Measuring, Researching, and Feeding Back

Another important next step will be to define which components of the approach are most effectively measured, and set up monitoring systems to track progress. We will continue to seek input on this approach to information and refine and adapt based on new data, evidence, and experience. Our future work will build an increasing research portfolio, and will explore ways to better embed research in our practice, creating additional feedback loops to enrich the quality of our work, make the learning increasingly robust, and make substantial contributions to conversations with donors, partners, academics, and communities. We will also redefine some long-held boundaries in our work, particularly those between the US and ‘developing and transitioning’ countries where we traditionally work. Although we are as committed as ever to working in Europe, Eurasia, and the Global South, we are newly committed to humbly take on the increasingly troubled information and media space in our own country. In the face of an ever-changing world, we will be guided by the principles of listening, adaptive learning, and knowledge gathering that support Vibrant Information.

Annex A: Methodology

To assemble the approach to vibrant information, we used mixed methods to gather information and inspiration. Research included:

1. A focus group with key holders of IREX media institutional knowledge (consisting of current and former staff) to look back at our history and identify our past approach, how it evolved, gaps, and opportunities
2. A human centered design workshop with 15 DC-based staff working on information and media projects to uncover strengths, needs, gaps, and opportunities coming out of our current work
3. 25+ interviews and conversations with current and former field staff working on information and media projects (including some recently closed projects) to identify more precisely the range of work we are currently doing, what makes IREX's approach distinct, needs and gaps out in the field, and future trends to watch
4. A review of recent select IREX proposals to tease out formulations of our past Media Approach and Civil Society Approach not documented elsewhere
5. Observations and inspiration from relevant conferences, journalistic articles, and research, in particular to pinpoint important questions and identify trends and signals of the future
6. A brief review of other media development and development communications organizations to assess comparative strengths and approaches.