

# Study

## Assessment of the Digital Media Environment in Jordan

Performance Index Center | KAFKA' A

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## Research Team

Hanan Baki

Muath Mbaidheen

Charif Sada

Sanad Khater

Yahia Shukeir

Dr. Mohammed Habes

Muath Al-Dhissat

Abdullah Ali

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## Executive Summary

This study assesses the digital media and business environment in Jordan, with emphasis on regulation, technological transformation, and media sustainability. Using a mixed-methods approach, combining desk research with over 30 stakeholder interviews, the analysis highlights the structural barriers and opportunities shaping the sector. Findings show that Jordan's media is at a critical point. While the country leads in regional digital economy initiatives, independent outlets remain constrained by restrictive laws, financial fragility, and limited digital capacity. The Cybercrime Law No. 17 of 2023 has reintroduced custodial penalties for broadly defined offenses such as “false news,” reinforcing self-censorship and undermining press freedom. These legal uncertainties increase the perceived risk of investing in new or critical media projects, pushing both investors and advertisers toward less regulated spaces, including global platforms.

Economically, public outlets benefit from subsidies and preferential access to state advertising, while private and independent institutions depend on donor projects and an advertising market increasingly captured by global platforms. Stakeholders interviewed for this study estimated that around 80 million JOD in annual advertising spending now bypasses local outlets in favour of international platforms, deepening financial fragility and reducing resources available for innovation. Audience reluctance to pay for content further undermines sustainability. Technological change presents both risks and opportunities. Although AI and digital tools are transforming journalism globally, adoption in Jordan is fragmented and hampered by inadequate resources, ethical concerns, and weak institutional readiness.

These dynamics reinforce one another: restrictive laws and ambiguous offences elevate legal risk, weak business models limit investment in technology and skills, and slow digital adoption makes local media less competitive, which in turn diverts audiences and advertisers to global platforms. The study identifies key entry points for reform: revising licensing and taxation frameworks, diversifying funding models, strengthening institutional capacity, and developing a national strategy for responsible AI adoption. It also highlights the need for targeted measures to rebalance the advertising ecosystem, incentivise investment in independent outlets, and support experimentation with membership- and subscription-based models. Without integrated reforms, Jordan's media will remain vulnerable, limiting its role in democratic accountability and public trust.

## Introduction

Jordan's media environment is shaped by the interplay of regulatory constraints, economic fragility, and rapid technological change. Over the past two decades, the country has positioned itself as a regional leader in internet penetration and digital economy policy, achieving strong performance in the Arab Digital Economy Index and advancing in e-government and artificial intelligence initiatives. However, the evolution of its media sector, particularly independent and digital outlets, has been uneven. Legacy legal frameworks, restrictive laws, and limited institutional capacity have created an environment where digital progress coexists with shrinking press freedom and declining public trust.

Traditional print media in Jordan has experienced a sharp and sustained decline. Reduced advertising revenues, shifting audience behaviours, and regulatory pressures have eroded the viability of major newspapers, while digital platforms have expanded rapidly as alternative sources of information. This digital shift has increased access and diversity of content but has also heightened vulnerabilities related to misinformation, surveillance, and regulatory overreach. The enactment of the Cybercrime Law No. 17 of 2023 has marked a turning point by reintroducing custodial penalties for broadly defined offenses such as "false news." These developments have intensified self-censorship, curtailed investigative journalism, and constrained the space for critical discourse.

At the same time, Jordan promotes a narrative of digital transformation and innovation, with government strategies emphasizing artificial intelligence, entrepreneurship, and digital service delivery. While these efforts highlight the country's ambition to modernize its economy, media institutions, particularly independent and private ones, often remain excluded from the benefits of such initiatives. Financial fragility, a lack of professional development opportunities, and a widening digital skills gap limit their capacity to adapt to global technological shifts. Without stronger institutional support, Jordan's media sector risks falling behind in the digital transformation underway across the region.

This study provides a comprehensive assessment of Jordan's digital media and business environment through desk research and more than thirty stakeholder interviews with

representatives from government institutions, civil society, private sector actors, and media professionals. The analysis is structured around four interrelated pillars:

1. **Legal and regulatory frameworks** governing media operations, freedom of expression, and licensing requirements.
2. **Technology and AI integration** in media institutions, including opportunities and ethical dilemmas.
3. **Media sustainability and business models**, with emphasis on public funding, advertising dynamics, and donor dependency.
4. **Digital transformation readiness**, covering infrastructure, institutional capacity, and innovation uptake.

By analysing these dimensions together, the study seeks to generate evidence-based recommendations for fostering a more resilient, independent, and inclusive media ecosystem in Jordan. The findings aim to inform policymakers, donors, and media actors committed to advancing press freedom, digital rights, and democratic resilience in the digital age.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to capture both the structural and experiential dimensions of Jordan's digital media environment. Two primary methods were used: desk research and semi-structured interviews.

**Desk Research** involved reviewing national legislation, policy documents, international indices, academic studies, and reports from civil society and donor organizations. This provided a contextual understanding of the legal, economic, and technological factors shaping the sector.

**Stakeholder Interviews** were conducted with more than 30 representatives from government institutions, independent media outlets, traditional press, civil society organizations, and the private sector. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, enabling consistency across core themes while allowing flexibility to explore issues raised by participants.

### Interviewees included:

- **Government officials**, particularly from the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, the Ministry of Government Communication, the Ministry of Finance, and the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission.
- **Media professionals**, including editors, journalists, and managers from independent digital platforms and traditional outlets.
- **Private sector actors**, particularly from advertising and media financing industries.
- **Civil society and legal experts**, specializing in media law, digital rights, and freedom of expression.

**Data triangulation** was applied to strengthen reliability. Insights from interviews were systematically compared with findings from desk research to identify convergence, divergence, and gaps. This approach enabled a balanced analysis of both formal structures and lived experiences within Jordan's media ecosystem.

# Legal and Regulatory Environment of Digital Media

## 1. Overview

Jordan's media system has long been regulated through a set of overlapping laws designed for print and broadcast outlets. With the rise of digital platforms, these frameworks were extended to cover online content, creating a complex and often restrictive environment. While digital media initially opened space for marginalized voices and new entrants, the layering of licensing requirements, ambiguous legal definitions, and punitive penalties has significantly shaped how journalists and outlets operate today.



## 2. Press and Publications Law (PPL)

The Press and Publications Law (No. 8 of 1998, amended 2010) is the foundational legislation governing print and online publications. It requires newspapers, magazines, and websites to obtain licenses from the Media Commission, with final approval by the Council of Ministers. While applicants have the right to appeal refusals, the Council retains broad discretion.

### Key provisions include:

- Only Jordanian citizens or entities may own publications; foreign investment is prohibited.
- Editors-in-chief must be members of the Jordan Press Association.

- Publications are expected to uphold truth, balance, and objectivity, though these terms are undefined.
- Since the **2010** Court of Cassation ruling, websites are legally classified as “publications,” making them subject to licensing and registration.

The PPL does not impose prison sentences; violations typically result in fines. However, the law authorizes authorities to block unlicensed websites, leading to more than **300** outlets currently inaccessible within Jordan. Although less punitive than other legislation, the PPL has been criticized for restricting pluralism by limiting foreign investment, tying editorial leadership to a professional association, and maintaining vague editorial standards that allow for selective enforcement. Interviewees noted that this combination of vague standards and rigid ownership rules has, in several cases, prompted potential investors to withdraw from planned digital media ventures after legal consultations highlighted the uncertainty surrounding licensing decisions and long-term regulatory stability.

### **3. Licensing and Administrative Control**

The licensing framework functions as both a regulatory and political tool. Applications must be processed within **30** days; if no decision is issued, approval is automatic. In practice, however, licensing decisions are often delayed or denied without transparent criteria. This system has deterred investment in independent media ventures, especially those seeking to operate online. Stakeholders interviewed for this study emphasized that licensing is often used to pressure outlets into aligning with government policies. Several interviewees noted that unlicensed websites are easily targeted, either through blocking or lawsuits, even when their content is not explicitly in violation of other laws. As a result, some outlets deliberately avoid launching innovative products, such as investigative platforms or data-driven projects, that would require additional licences or expand editorial risk, even when there is demonstrated audience demand.

### **4. Audio-visual Law and the Penal Code**

The Audio-visual Law regulates radio and television broadcasting. It prohibits material that could incite sectarian or ethnic divisions, undermine national unity, instigate terrorism,

or damage relations with other states. The Penal Code reinforces these restrictions, criminalizing speech or publications that may lead to “sectarian strife” or “conflict between communities.” Penalties include imprisonment of six months to three years, alongside fines. While such provisions are justified by the state as safeguards of national security and cohesion, their broad and imprecise language allows for wide discretion in enforcement. As a result, broadcasters frequently avoid sensitive political or social issues to minimize risk.

## 5. Cybercrime Law No. 17 of 2023

The adoption of the Cybercrime Law in 2023 marked a turning point in Jordan’s digital regulatory environment. Unlike the PPL and Audio-visual Law, which primarily rely on fines, the Cybercrime Law reinstated custodial penalties for online expression.

### Controversial provisions include:

- **Article 15:** Criminalizes “false news” that threatens national security or public peace, with penalties of three months’ imprisonment or fines between 5,000–20,000 JOD.
- **Article 16:** Criminalizes “character assassination” through online platforms, with similar penalties.
- **Article 17:** Prohibits content likely to stir sedition, incite hatred, or insult religion, punishable by one to three years in prison.
- **Article 21:** Criminalizes unlicensed online fundraising and investment activities.

The law has been widely criticized by journalists, civil society organizations, and international watchdogs such as Freedom House, which warned that it “suffocates online expression.” The National Center for Human Rights recommended amending Article 15 to avoid duplication with the Penal Code and to reduce penalties to ensure that journalists are not subject to arrest.

Since its enforcement, the law has led to a surge in self-censorship. Several cases illustrate its impact:

- In October 2023, two individuals were fined 10,000 JOD for sharing earthquake predictions deemed “false news.”
- A journalist was sentenced to one year in prison for satirical commentary on government performance.
- Another journalist, Hiba Abu Taha, received a one-year custodial sentence, an unprecedented penalty in Jordanian press history.

These cases reflect the chilling effect of vague legal terms, where “false news” and “character assassination” are left undefined and subject to prosecutorial interpretation.

## 6. Regional Context

Compared with some other Arab countries that have begun to narrow the use of criminal penalties for publication-related offences or to streamline online licensing, Jordan’s framework remains relatively fragmented and punitive. In several neighbouring jurisdictions, recent reforms have focused on consolidating media laws, clarifying the scope of digital regulation, and prioritising administrative over criminal sanctions.

By contrast, Jordan still relies on overlapping provisions in the Press and Publications Law, Audio-visual Law, Penal Code, and Cybercrime Law. This places Jordan in a middle position regionally: more advanced than states where digital content remains largely unregulated, but lagging behind those that have moved toward clearer, rights-based frameworks. These comparative experiences provide useful reference points for future reform, illustrating how states can protect national security and public order without relying heavily on custodial penalties and ambiguous offences.

## 7. Stakeholder Perspectives

Interviews conducted for this study revealed a broad consensus that Jordan’s current media legislation functions less as a regulatory framework and more as a mechanism of control. Journalists, editors, civil society actors, and former officials all acknowledged the profound chilling effect of overlapping laws, particularly following the adoption of the 2023 Cybercrime Law.

- **Media professionals** repeatedly emphasized that lawsuits have become routine. Journalists are regularly summoned to courts, often for minor or ambiguous infractions, with one editor noting that “colleagues constantly shuttle between courtrooms,” even though conviction rates remain low. The process itself is viewed as punitive, consuming time and resources while fostering a climate of fear.



- **Civil society actors** argued that legislation is used primarily to shield officials from criticism rather than to regulate professional standards. One interviewee described the legal environment as “a protective barrier around government employees,” noting that vague terms such as false news or character assassination are applied selectively.
- **Legal experts** highlighted the incompatibility of Jordan’s laws with international human rights standards. They warned that undefined terminology, such as “inciting strife” or “contempt of religion”, invites arbitrary enforcement and discourages legitimate criticism.
- **Former officials** expressed mixed views. Some defended aspects of the Cybercrime Law as a tool to enhance professionalism, arguing that stricter penalties encourage responsible journalism. Others acknowledged its chilling effect on public debate. A former Minister of Government Communication conceded that weak administration and resistance to modernization had left public institutions unable to adapt to digital change, undermining both regulation and reform.
- **Editors and publishers** described the licensing process as burdensome and opaque. Several noted that delays or rejections are often politically motivated, creating uncertainty that deters investment in independent outlets. One publisher stated: “Even when our content is not controversial, the threat of being blocked hangs over us like a sword.”

Overall, stakeholders conveyed deep frustration with a regulatory environment that prioritizes state control over professional development, leaving journalists vulnerable and institutions hesitant to innovate.

**Table 1: Stakeholder Perspectives and Implications for Media Freedom in Jordan**

Stakeholder Group	Key Perspectives (from interviews)	Implications for Media Freedom
Journalists & Editors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Routine court summons; lawsuits used as pressure tactics.</li> <li>• Licensing delays and threat of website blocking discourage investment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creates a climate of fear and self-censorship.</li> <li>• Discourages innovation and weakens institutional resilience.</li> </ul>
Civil Society Actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws function as protection for officials rather than regulation.</li> <li>• Vague terms like “false news” and “character assassination” applied selectively.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinforces dependency on state-aligned media.</li> <li>• Erodes pluralism and public trust in journalism.</li> </ul>
Legal Experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Laws conflict with international human rights standards.</li> <li>• Undefined terminology invites arbitrary enforcement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduces permissible criticism.</li> <li>• Increases vulnerability of independent outlets to political pressure.</li> </ul>
Former Officials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some defend stricter penalties as encouraging professionalism.</li> <li>• Others acknowledge laws have chilling effect and highlight weak institutional modernization.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirms state priorities remain control-focused rather than reform-oriented.</li> <li>• Delays meaningful adaptation to digital transformation.</li> </ul>
Publishers/Owners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Licensing opaque and politically influenced.</li> <li>• Even non-controversial outlets fear arbitrary blocking.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Barriers to entry for new or independent media.</li> <li>• Concentration of market power among state-backed outlets.</li> </ul>

## 8. Implications for Media Freedom

The cumulative effect of Jordan's overlapping media laws is a restrictive and uncertain operating environment. Three interrelated dynamics stand out:

- **Legal ambiguity:** Journalists remain uncertain about what constitutes a violation under the Press and Publications Law, the Audio-visual Law, and the Cybercrime Law. Terms such as “false news,” “character assassination,” and “incitement” lack precise definitions, leaving wide discretion to prosecutors and regulators. This ambiguity encourages self-censorship, as outlets err on the side of caution to avoid costly litigation or criminal charges.
- **Punitive enforcement:** The reintroduction of custodial penalties under the Cybercrime Law has significantly intensified the risks of digital journalism. Cases of journalists sentenced to one year in prison, including for satirical commentary, mark an unprecedented escalation in Jordan's media history. Even in instances where charges do not result in convictions, the investigative and trial processes themselves impose financial and psychological burdens on media workers.
- **Barriers to innovation:** Licensing requirements, restrictions on foreign investment, and professional association rules combine to discourage new entrants into the media sector. Start-ups and digital-only outlets face high entry costs and legal vulnerability, limiting their ability to challenge established players or experiment with new formats.
- **Erosion of public trust:** Excessive regulation has reinforced perceptions that media outlets are aligned with state interests. Interviews suggest that audiences increasingly distrust the independence of domestic institutions, turning instead to social media or international platforms for information. This trend undermines both professional journalism and democratic accountability.

Taken together, these dynamics show that Jordan's legal environment does not foster a vibrant or sustainable media ecosystem. Instead, it entrenches dependency on state-aligned outlets, weakens independent journalism, and narrows the space for public debate in the digital era.

These legal constraints do not operate in isolation. They directly shape the economic and technological trajectory of the sector: outlets facing high legal risk and uncertain licensing conditions are less likely to invest in long-term business development, experiment with new digital formats, or adopt AI-driven tools that could expose them to additional scrutiny.

In practice, this means that even when donor or commercial funding is available, many institutions prioritise low-risk, low-innovation content over investigative or data-intensive journalism, reinforcing the stagnation described in subsequent sections.

# Jordan's Digital Economy and Media Market Dynamics

## 1. Position in the Arab Digital Economy

Jordan has positioned itself as a regional leader in digital transformation. The Arab Digital Economy Index (2024) ranked Jordan seventh among 22 Arab states, placing it in the category of “active transition” countries. The index highlights strengths in e-government, labor preparedness, and market evolution, with Jordan consistently scoring above the regional average despite periodic fluctuations.

The report also emphasized that Jordan must expand cybersecurity systems, stimulate private sector innovation, and strengthen infrastructure to consolidate its gains. While the state has adopted ambitious digital strategies, including AI integration, gaps remain in innovation and market competitiveness.

## 2. Infrastructure and Connectivity

Jordan's ICT infrastructure has expanded significantly over the past decade. By 2024:

- 4G LTE and early 5G services covered nearly 90% of the population.
- Mobile penetration reached 78.1%, among the highest in the MENA region.
- Internet penetration rates exceeded regional averages.

However, challenges persist. Broadband and mobile data prices remain high relative to regional peers, limiting affordability for lower-income households and rural communities. Connectivity gaps persist along gender and socioeconomic lines, reducing equal access to digital opportunities.

## 3. Media Consumption and Audience Behaviour

Findings from the Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) demonstrate that Jordanians' media habits are shaped more by time constraints and convenience than by deliberate choice. Key patterns include:

- Social media is the dominant source of information, particularly Facebook, followed by platforms such as TikTok (accessed through VPNs due to government restrictions).
- Video-based platforms are gaining traction among younger audiences, while traditional print media continues to decline.



- Influencers, many of whom are also journalists, are acting as important information brokers despite public concerns about commercialization and mental health effects.
- Limited interest in political news, particularly formal processes and reforms, though local political events and human rights issues draw more engagement.
- Trust in traditional media remains low, with state-run channels such as JRTV and Al-Mamlaka receiving relatively higher trust but not necessarily higher consumption.

"WhatsApp" plays a supplementary role, with group chats commonly used to share links related to local news, sports, or university updates. Audiences perceive content shared through WhatsApp groups as safer and more private than content consumed directly from public platforms.

#### 4. Advertising Market and Financial Flows

The media market faces acute sustainability challenges, largely due to shifts in advertising dynamics. Approximately 80 million JOD annually in advertising revenue now flows

directly to global platforms such as Meta and Google, bypassing local media institutions altogether.



Interviewees consistently described this figure as “transformational” for the market: it represents a substantial share of national advertising spending and has forced even long-established newspapers and broadcasters to cut staff, freeze investigative projects, and reduce investment in digital innovation. This diversion of revenue has severely undermined the financial base of newspapers, broadcasters, and digital outlets.

At the same time, influencers and content creators, operating outside traditional licensing and taxation frameworks, have become major competitors for advertising. They monetize content more flexibly through brand partnerships, while licensed media institutions continue to bear higher operational costs related to regulation, licensing, and professional standards.

### **These dynamics reinforce structural imbalances:**

- Publicly owned outlets benefit from subsidies, tax exemptions, and preferential access to state advertising.
- Independent media outlets struggle to secure long-term funding, relying on fragmented donor projects and inconsistent advertising streams. In many cases, donor funding now covers a higher proportion of operating budgets than commercial income, but is tied to short project cycles and rigid deliverables. This combination, shrinking advertising revenue and short-term grant support, leaves outlets without the reserves needed to upgrade technology, retain skilled staff, or

build audience-facing products that could eventually sustain subscription or membership models.

- Audiences remain reluctant to pay for content, limiting the potential for subscription-based models, except in niche cases such as the Nabd app, which succeeded in attracting over 600,000 users through tiered services.

## 5. Implications for Independent Media

The intersection of digital progress and financial fragility has produced a paradox. Jordan is advancing in national digital economy rankings, yet its independent media sector remains weak and under-resourced. Stakeholders interviewed for this study highlighted that while audiences are highly connected, their consumption patterns reinforce dependency on global platforms rather than local outlets.

Without structural reforms to the advertising ecosystem and stronger incentives for national media investment, independent outlets will remain financially unsustainable. Moreover, the growing dominance of influencers risks blurring the line between journalism and entertainment, further eroding professional standards and weakening the sector’s accountability role.

**Table 2: Legal Framework Governing Digital Media in Jordan**

Law	Scope / Main Provisions	Penalties / Enforcement	Implications for Media Freedom
Press and Publications Law (No. 8 of 1998, amended 2010)	Regulates print and online publications; requires licensing from the Media Commission; editors-in-chief must be Jordan Press Association members; prohibits foreign ownership.	Primarily fines; authorities can block unlicensed websites (over 300 currently blocked).	Extends state control to digital outlets; vague standards (“truth, balance, objectivity”) allow discretionary enforcement; discourages foreign investment and limits pluralism.
Audio-visual Law	Governs radio and television broadcasting; prohibits material that may incite sectarianism, threaten national unity, or harm relations with other states.	Fines and imprisonment (6 months–3 years).	Broad restrictions create wide enforcement discretion; encourages broadcasters to avoid sensitive political or social topics.

Law	Scope / Main Provisions	Penalties / Enforcement	Implications for Media Freedom
Penal Code (relevant articles)	Criminalizes speech inciting sectarian strife, discrimination, or conflict between communities.	Imprisonment (6 months–3 years).	Reinforces limits on critical or controversial coverage; overlaps with other legislation to expand state control.
Cybercrime Law (No. 17 of 2023)	Criminalizes “false news,” “character assassination,” contempt of religion, and content threatening national security or social peace; regulates online fundraising/investment.	Imprisonment (3 months–3 years); fines (5,000–20,000 JOD) or both.	Reintroduces custodial penalties; vague terms increase self-censorship; weakens investigative reporting; undermines freedom of expression online.

# Technology, AI, and Digitization

## 1. Technology and AI in Jordan's Digital Transition

Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have emerged as central drivers of social and economic transformation worldwide, reshaping traditional business models and accelerating digital integration. In Jordan, digital transformation is increasingly framed as a strategic imperative to sustain economic growth, modernize public services, and strengthen democratic values such as press freedom. The Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector already contributes approximately 12% of national GDP, reflecting its role as a cornerstone of the digital economy. National initiatives, including the Digital Entrepreneurship Program, are designed to stimulate innovation, foster start-ups, and expand the knowledge economy. AI applications such as data analytics and machine learning are gradually being deployed across education, healthcare, and government services, for instance, in municipal automation systems aimed at streamlining service delivery. Despite these advances, the integration of AI into the media sector remains nascent and uneven, constrained by financial, technical, and institutional barriers.

## 2. AI and Digitization in Media Practices

Globally, AI has become a critical enabler of media innovation, offering tools for automation, personalization, and content integrity. Jordanian media organizations, however, continue to lag behind regional and international counterparts in institutional adoption. Current practices can be grouped into five main areas:

- **Automation of content production:** Algorithms are increasingly used to generate routine news, such as sports and financial updates, allowing journalists to focus on investigative reporting and analytical work. International outlets like Reuters and the Associated Press provide relevant models of efficiency and accuracy through such automation.
- **Audience analytics and personalization:** AI-powered tools enable platforms to track audience preferences and deliver customized recommendations, mirroring

practices in global platforms such as Netflix. This enhances engagement but also raises concerns about echo chambers and filter bubbles.

- **Content moderation and misinformation detection:** AI systems are employed to filter comments, authenticate information, and combat disinformation. While these tools enhance credibility, they also risk over-censorship when not transparently managed.
- **Multi-channel platforms:** Jordanian outlets are gradually adopting multi-format strategies, combining podcasts, video, and interactive media, to reach audiences across diverse platforms. AI analytics support these efforts by identifying trending formats and optimizing content delivery.
- **Advertising optimization:** Predictive analytics allow media organizations to tailor advertisements based on user behavior, boosting revenue potential and improving return on investment.

These practices illustrate both the potential of AI to expand reach and efficiency and the risks of exacerbating inequalities, since well-financed outlets are more capable of adopting advanced tools than smaller, independent ones.

### 3. Government Efforts and Ethical Dilemmas

The Jordanian government has taken steps to institutionalize digital transformation, with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship spearheading initiatives on e-government and digital infrastructure. Most recently, the Royal directive of January 2025 established the National Council for Future Technology under the Crown Prince, tasked with monitoring global developments and guiding national adoption strategies. Such policies underscore the political commitment to digitization.

Nevertheless, the incorporation of AI into journalism introduces complex ethical dilemmas. Concerns include data privacy violations, algorithmic bias, manipulation of public opinion, and the amplification of misinformation. Studies of Arab and Jordanian media institutions highlight risks such as the collection of personal data without consent and the use of algorithms to privilege sensationalist over substantive content. Ethical questions also extend to issues of diversity, accountability, and transparency, as newsrooms adopt technologies they do not fully control or understand. Meta-analytical studies show that AI

applications in journalism, ranging from robot journalism and virtual presenters to automated recommendation systems, can improve efficiency but often challenge professional standards and blur accountability.

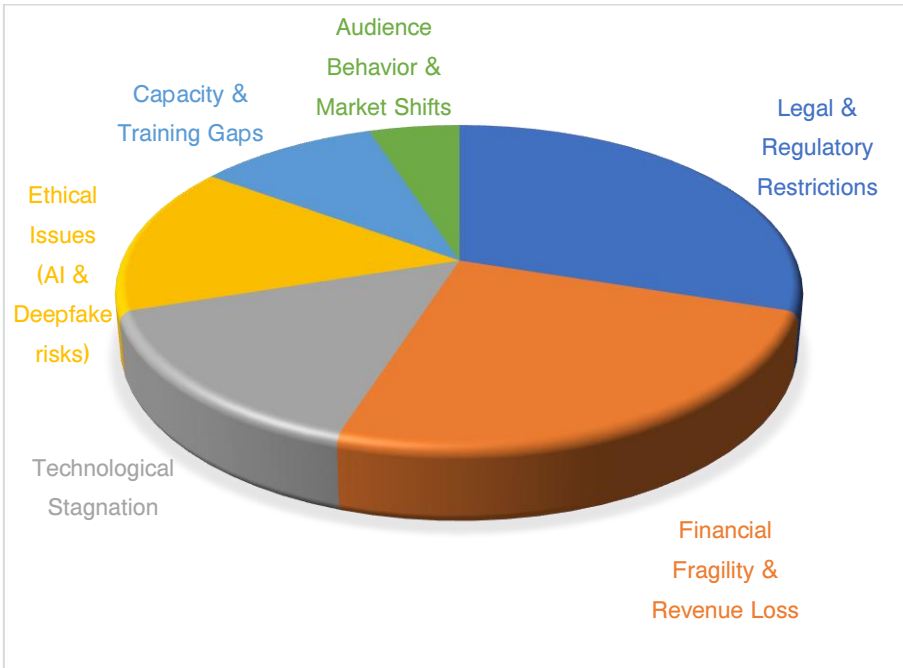
#### 4. Challenges for Jordanian Media Digital Transformation

Despite policy commitments, Jordanian media institutions face persistent obstacles in adapting to AI and digital technologies. These challenges fall into four interconnected categories:

- **Technical and infrastructural:** Many outlets lack the resources to invest in advanced systems, leading to uneven adoption and a widening digital gap between well-funded and under-resourced institutions.
- **Ethical and legal:** The spread of deepfake technologies and algorithmic news prioritization undermines credibility and raises serious questions about editorial independence and accountability. The absence of a clear legislative framework governing AI in media exacerbates these risks.
- **Capacity and skills:** Media organizations struggle with limited expertise, insufficient training programs, and the absence of specialized roles such as content verifiers or algorithm auditors. This constrains the ability to critically assess AI outputs and ensure professional oversight.
- **Financial and institutional:** Funding gaps prevent many outlets from experimenting with AI applications, while reliance on short-term donor support has produced fragmented and unsustainable innovation.



In practice, AI integration in Jordan remains largely at the individual level, with journalists informally using tools such as translation and transcription software, rather than systemic adoption at the institutional level. Most newsrooms interviewed reported relying primarily on basic social media management tools and office software, with only a small number of better-resourced outlets experimenting with automation, data analytics, or AI-assisted verification.



**Figure 1: Major challenges facing Jordanian media in the digital era (conceptual overview)**

Jordan's media sector stands at a crossroads. While AI and digital technologies offer opportunities to expand efficiency, engagement, and credibility, their adoption is slowed by financial fragility, limited skills, and unresolved ethical and legal questions. The result is a fragmented environment where a small group of well-funded institutions experiment with innovation, while the majority of outlets lag behind. In practical terms, this means that the same outlets that already benefit from preferential access to advertising and public support are also best placed to adopt advanced tools, widening the gap with smaller, independent media.

A targeted roadmap for digital transformation emerging from this assessment could include:

1. Establishing dedicated public–donor innovation funds to support newsroom experimentation with AI and data-driven storytelling.
2. Issuing national guidelines on AI ethics in journalism, covering transparency, accountability, and data protection.
3. Subsidised training programmes in data journalism, product development, and audience analytics, developed in partnership with universities and media institutes.
4. Incentives for collaborative projects between media outlets, technology companies, and research centres to share tools, infrastructure, and expertise.

Without such a coherent strategy that balances innovation and ethical safeguards, Jordanian media risks deepening its digital divide and missing critical opportunities for growth and credibility in the digital age.

## Media Sustainability Support

The sustainability of Jordan's media sector remains heavily constrained by financial fragility, particularly among private and independent outlets that lack diversified and stable revenue streams. In contrast, public media institutions continue to benefit from direct state subsidies and preferential regulatory treatment. The **2025** general budget, for example, allocated **28.978** million JOD to the Jordan Radio and Television Corporation and **10** million JOD to Al-Mamlaka TV. Similarly, public ownership of newspapers such as Al-Rai and Ad-Dustour through the Social Security Corporation ensures privileged access to state advertising and tax exemptions. While such support stabilizes government-aligned outlets, it creates structural asymmetries that disadvantage private and independent platforms.

Private media institutions, which represent a critical component of media pluralism, often depend on fragmented advertising markets and donor-driven projects. These funding sources are typically short-term, with donor grants rarely covering operational costs such as salaries, rent, or infrastructure. Many outlets resort to informal patronage networks, seeking financial backing from business elites or politicians. However, such dependency risks compromising editorial independence and reinforcing political polarization, raising long-term questions about media integrity. The digital shift has further disrupted traditional revenue models. An estimated **80** million JOD in advertising annually bypasses local outlets and flows directly to global platforms such as Meta and Google. This reallocation of resources erodes the economic foundations of domestic media while empowering unregulated influencers, who often monetize more flexibly and rapidly than professional outlets. Unlike registered institutions, influencers operate outside licensing, taxation, and union frameworks, intensifying competition while avoiding the regulatory obligations imposed on media organizations.

Audience behaviour compounds these challenges. Most Jordanians, especially younger demographics, expect free access to online news and remain reluctant to pay for journalism unless it offers highly specialized content. One of the rare exceptions is the Nabd app, which introduced tiered subscription models (e.g., gold and platinum packages) and attracted over **600,000** downloads by offering curated and customized

news feeds. While this demonstrates that innovative monetization is possible, such models remain isolated rather than systemic.

Government support for digital transformation has so far been limited and fragmented. While some initiatives have provided technical equipment or supported the development of online platforms, they have been reactive rather than strategic. Interviews conducted for this study revealed a consensus among both public and private stakeholders that a more coherent policy approach is urgently needed. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of donor-supported funds that focus not only on financing but also on professional training and applied research, particularly in digital skills, monetization strategies, and audience engagement. Ultimately, ensuring media sustainability requires a shift from ad hoc financial injections toward long-term capacity-building. Investment should focus on strengthening business models, expanding digital competencies, and promoting innovation. By reorienting support toward resilience and adaptability, Jordanian media institutions can better navigate the challenges of digital disruption and contribute more meaningfully to public discourse and democratic accountability.

Looking ahead, experiences from Jordan and comparable markets point to several concrete models that could be piloted or scaled up. One option is the creation of shared advertising or media development funds, where a portion of public advertising budgets, donor resources, or voluntary contributions from telecom and technology companies is pooled and allocated competitively to independent outlets based on transparent criteria and public-interest indicators.

Another pathway involves using fiscal tools to steer private-sector spending toward local media, for example, allowing businesses to deduct a higher share of advertising expenditures with registered Jordanian outlets, or reducing VAT on digital subscriptions and memberships. These measures would not replace market forces but would help level the playing field between domestic institutions and global platforms.

Finally, membership- and community-supported models offer opportunities to build direct relationships with audiences, particularly in niche or local markets. With modest start-up support, such as seed grants, technical assistance on payment systems, and training on audience engagement, selected outlets could test membership schemes that combine small, regular contributions with added value (events, newsletters, explainers, or access to journalists). Lessons from these pilots could then inform broader policy on sustainable, audience-driven journalism in Jordan.

## Conclusion

Jordan's digital media ecosystem is at a pivotal juncture, shaped by overlapping challenges in regulation, finance, technology, and institutional capacity.

While public media institutions benefit from consistent state subsidies and regulatory advantages, private and independent outlets face mounting obstacles, including shrinking advertising revenues, fragmented donor support, and intensified competition from unregulated influencers and transnational platforms.

Technological stagnation further compounds these financial pressures. Although Jordan ranks among the regional leaders in digital economy indicators, media institutions have been slow to adopt artificial intelligence and other advanced tools, largely due to limited resources, insufficient training, and unresolved ethical and legal questions. The result is a widening digital divide between well-financed outlets experimenting with innovation and under-resourced institutions struggling for survival. The regulatory environment adds a further layer of uncertainty. Outdated licensing frameworks, vague provisions in the Cybercrime Law, and rigid professional requirements contribute to self-censorship, inhibit innovation, and discourage investment in the sector. In parallel, changing audience behaviours, particularly among younger generations accustomed to free, on-demand content, undermine traditional business models and heighten the urgency of digital adaptation.

Crucially, these challenges are not isolated. Restrictive and ambiguous laws raise the perceived risk of launching new outlets or formats, which discourages investment and limits experimentation with digital products. Weak and uneven revenue streams then make it difficult for newsrooms to invest in skills, technology, or audience-centred products, reinforcing dependence on state support and short-term donor grants. Slow and unequal adoption of AI and other digital tools, in turn, pushes audiences and advertisers toward global platforms that can offer more personalised and engaging experiences, further eroding the economic base of local media. This cycle locks many Jordanian outlets into a low-investment, low-innovation equilibrium.

Despite these constraints, opportunities remain. Isolated success stories such as the Nabd platform illustrate the potential of subscription- or service-based models tailored to

niche audiences. Similarly, government initiatives on digital infrastructure, entrepreneurship, and future technologies provide an entry point for broader reform if explicitly aligned with media development strategies and freedom-of-expression principles. Regionally, Jordan also has the advantage of being able to draw on comparative experiences from Arab countries that have begun to rationalise media laws, decriminalise certain publication-related offences, or support independent journalism through transparent funds and incentives.

**A realistic reform roadmap emerging from this assessment can be summarised in three interlocking priorities:**

1. De-risk the legal environment by narrowing vague offences, reducing reliance on custodial penalties for media-related cases, simplifying licensing procedures, and clarifying the distinction between professional journalism and other digital content.
2. Rebuild the economic foundations of independent media through fairer allocation of public advertising, targeted tax and regulatory incentives for businesses that support local outlets, and structured support for experimentation with membership, subscription, and other diversified revenue models.
3. Accelerate ethical digital transformation by investing in newsroom skills, shared technological infrastructure, and clear governance standards for the use of AI and data analytics in journalism.

Pursued together rather than in isolation, these steps would move Jordan's media sector from managing recurring crises to planning for long-term resilience, enabling it to play a stronger role in democratic accountability, public debate, and social cohesion in the digital age.

## Recommendations

These recommendations are grounded in three interrelated pillars that emerged from the study: reducing the legal risks surrounding digital media activity, rebuilding the economic foundations of independent media, and accelerating responsible and ethical digital transformation. They aim to translate these priorities into practical steps directed at policymakers, media institutions, and donors and international partners.

### For Policymakers:

- De-risk the legal environment by revising licensing, registration, and taxation frameworks to lower barriers for independent and digital-first outlets, narrowing vague offences in media- and cyber-related laws, and shifting from custodial to administrative penalties so that regulations encourage innovation rather than constrain it.
- Develop a more coherent media law architecture that clearly distinguishes professional journalism from influencer and platform-based content, formally recognises community and local media, and provides predictable, transparent procedures for online licensing, renewal, and dispute resolution.
- Rebuild the economic foundations of independent media by reforming the advertising ecosystem: adopt transparent criteria for the allocation of public advertising, introduce fiscal or regulatory incentives for telecoms and large advertisers to devote a defined share of spending to Jordanian outlets, and explore shared development or innovation funds co-financed by public, private, and donor partners.
- Ensure that public support to the media sector actively reduces, rather than reinforces, existing imbalances by prioritising investments in the digital infrastructure, skills, and product-development capacity of independent and local outlets (including outside Amman), and by explicitly linking such support to adherence to professional and ethical standards.

## For Media Organizations:

- Systematically diversify revenue models, combining advertising with freemium services, branded content, events, production services, and membership or subscription schemes, and use audience data to regularly review which combinations are viable in Jordan's market instead of relying on a single dominant source of income.
- Invest in organisational capacity by dedicating time and budget to staff training in multi-platform production, product thinking, audience research and analytics, digital monetisation, and basic data and AI literacy, so that editorial and business teams can jointly plan for sustainable growth.
- Design content strategies specifically for younger and digitally native audiences, using mobile-first, interactive, and explanatory formats, and experiment with newsletters, vertical video, and social storytelling that connect lifestyle and entertainment content to issues of public interest.
- Create structured spaces and incentives for newsroom innovation, such as internal pilots, “sandbox” projects, or partnerships with universities and start-ups, focused on emerging formats (podcasts, short-form video, data visualisations) and careful experimentation with AI-powered tools for verification, translation, and workflow automation.

## For Donors and International Partners:

- Shift support from short-term, project-based interventions toward multi-year, flexible funding that prioritises institutional resilience, including core operating costs, business development, technology adoption, and internal governance reforms inside media institutions.
- Co-design and capitalise independent media development and innovation funds, separate from government and individual outlets, that can provide competitive grants, loans, or equity-like instruments for Jordanian media committed to public-interest journalism, transparency, and digital transformation.
- Invest in collaborative training and innovation hubs, in partnership with universities, journalism schools, and technology companies, that bring together

editors, technologists, product managers, and business leaders to develop skills in data journalism, AI, product design, and sustainable business models.

- Support applied research and audience-insight work on Jordanian media consumption, trust, and digital behaviour, and ensure that findings are shared openly so that policymakers, media organisations, and donors can align strategies with real market conditions rather than assumptions.