



Impact of Media in Democracy

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Abstract

Media organisations are generally assumed to play an important role in democracies, but how effective are they in performing this function within specific states? Lisa Müller outlines results from an analysis of 47 countries, based on a framework which rates two separate aspects of media performance: the extent to which they perform a ‘watchdog’ role by providing information, and the degree to which they act as a representative forum for the views of citizens. She finds that no country in the analysis scores very highly on both of these dimensions, but that the variations between states match differences in the quality of their democracy.

DEFINING GOALS: THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY

Access to information is essential to the health of democracy for at least two reasons. First, it ensures that citizens make responsible, informed choices rather than acting out of ignorance or misinformation. Second, information serves a “checking function” by ensuring that elected representatives uphold their oaths of office and carry out the wishes of those who elected them. In some societies, an antagonistic relationship between media and government represents a vital and healthy element of fully functioning democracies.

In post-conflict or ethnically homogenous societies such a conflictual, tension ridden relationship may not be appropriate, but the role of the press to disseminate information as a way of mediating between the state and all facets of civil society remains critical. Support for media is a critical prong of U.S. democracy and governance assistance. USAID Strategic Objective 2.3, “Increased development of a politically active civil society,” provides a rationale for media-related programming. Intermediate Result 2.3.4, “Enhanced free flow of information,” broadly states the Agency's goal for media activities. While media is considered



by USAID to be a part of the civil society arena, it is well known that media overlaps other functional areas of democracy and governance.

For example, support for media may yield results in governance activities, particularly those related to decentralization, anti-corruption, and citizen participation in the policy process. The rule of law may be further institutionalized by support for an independent media that keeps a check on the judiciary, reports on the courts, and promotes a legal enabling environment suitable for press freedom. Free and fair elections conducted through transparent processes require a media sector which gives candidates equal access, and reports the relevant issues in a timely, objective manner. International conventions buttress USAID's media activities. Most notably, Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers." Within the context of supporting democratic transitions, the goal of media development generally should be to move the media from one that is directed or even overtly controlled by government or private interests to one that is more open and has a degree of editorial independence that serves the public interest.

If the media is to have any meaningful role in democracy, then the ultimate goal of media assistance should be to develop a range of diverse mediums and voices that are credible, and to create and strengthen a sector that promotes such outlets. Credible outlets enable citizens to have access to information that they need to make informed decisions and to participate in society. A media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest. The public interest is defined as representing a plurality of voices both through a greater number of outlets and through the diversity of views and voices reflected within one outlet. 4
Role of Media in Democracy.

MAPPING THE SECTOR

Supporting media as an institution requires an understanding of what constitutes the sector. Clearly, the media sector consists of something beyond the specific outlets that deliver news



and information. But is it so amorphous that it encompasses everything from the universities that train future journalists to the courts that protect their rights?

One extremely useful attempt to map out the media sector comes from the USAIDfunded Media Development Program (MDP) in Russia. Jointly designed and implemented by the Russian American Press and Information Centre (RAPIC) and Internews/Moscow, MDP's goal is "to speed the development of a commercially viable media sector in Russia." The objectives devised to achieve this goal suggest a particular approach to defining and supporting the sector:

- Help foster advocacy for media with legislative and regulatory bodies
- Increase flows of advertising revenues to the regions (decentralization)
- Increase access to and ownership of production and distribution
- Increase investment and loan opportunities for regional media
- Increase horizontal ties among media professionals
- Expand educational and practical programs in electronic information gathering and dissemination
- Expand educational and practical programs in business, management, and technical skills
- Increase professional contacts and collaboration between domestic and foreign media companies and institutions
- Protect key resources, such as film and archive materials that document historical developments, outside news feeds, electronic information sources (such as Lexis-Nexis), access to public records, policymakers and government officials, etc. A related approach is offered by the RAPIC proposal to establish the Russian NGO as a permanent legacy of U.S. democracy assistance. The proposed program plan for RAPIC/National Press Institute (NPI) includes the following activities, which illustrate a sectoral approach:
- Promoting investment, equity and debt financing, leasing, and other mechanisms to capitalize the media industry
- Developing media management capacity

- Participating in the development of the legal and administrative infrastructure
- Fostering the development of a mature information culture
- Promoting industry-wide trade organizations and professional associations
- Overcoming government domination of information
- Raising the level of journalistic professionalism

These sectoral approaches illustrate the ways programs can have an overarching understanding of the interrelationship of the media industry's many parts and why the reform of the media sector necessitates a "web" of mutually reinforcing activities, the lack of any one of which can endanger any others.

IDENTIFYING KEY ACTORS



Some of the most important questions to consider when designing media support activities that strengthen democracy are, “Who holds the power to communicate in a society, who has access to the means of communication, and who is communicated to?” Answers to these questions will help to shape media sector support strategies by targeting obstacles and pinpointing opportunities for reform.

For example, in some countries the state has exclusive control over the media, directly or indirectly, and dictates the terms of public debate. Egypt has one news agency, the Middle East News Agency, which is the property of the state. Radio and television are state monopolies, and, as a result, news is presented as policy dictates. ² In Mexico, freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed, but the government controls the distribution of paper. In these cases, a suitable sector support strategy might be geared around civil society organizations which are publishing or broadcasting alternative viewpoints, or it might be focused on training state journalists to cover news in a more objective fashion.

If it is a particularly innovative strategy, it might include a training component for government ministers in an effort to raise their awareness about how a balanced and objective press contributes to political and economic well-being.

The question of “who is communicated to” is often overlooked, yet it is essential to develop a cadre of critical audience members who will demand information and will have the capacity to analyze what is presented to them. The answer to this question helps to determine which medium to target in media sector assistance. For example, if a strategy aims to reach the rural masses, a radio ² Idriss, Shahira. 1996. “Egypt Gets the News the Government's Way.” IPI Report. February/March: 28. campaign— particularly in countries with low literacy rates— might be more effective than a television or print strategy, which tends to reach urban, educated elites. On the other hand, if the political environment is very constrained and few groups are involved in reform, focusing media sector support on urban, elite-based print outlets might be appropriate in the short term in order to leverage change in the system through these reformers' efforts.

In sum, the following actors are relevant allies in media sector reform, and strengthening their capacity will support media sector development: · Consumers · Individual producers (reporters, editors, technicians, business managers) · Content provider companies (wire services, think



tanks, NGOs) · Training institutes, universities · Independent regulators · Media monitors (political polling agencies, policy institutes, advocacy groups, governments, advertisers) · Professional organizations (journalism and business associations) · New technology gatekeepers (infrastructure developers, software creators, trainers, investors)

DESIGNING MEDIA STRATEGIES

A. Steps to Strategy Development After defining the goals, mapping the sector, and identifying the key actors, the next issue is how to use this information and the strategic approach chart on pp. 15-16 to design a strategy. There are four basic steps to strategy development for media sector support: · Defining the problem Is the problem the mission faces due to legal restrictions, limited sectoral support, restricted pluralism, technical/professional capacity, and/or financial constraints? · Finding targets of opportunity What political, economic, and/or social opportunities exist to embark on media sector support? Who are the key actors who can assist these efforts? · Assessing the feasibility of activities In large part, this will involve an analysis of the mission's resources (time, funding, technical expertise) and the country's context.

· Evaluating USAID's comparative advantage in carrying out these activities This last step will determine what value is added by USAID becoming involved in media sector support in a particular country. What can USAID contribute? As the U.S. government engages in media sector support, several issues arise which should be carefully considered in order to maximize impact and effectiveness. First, decisions should be made at the outset whether it is possible to work at a macro level in areas like media law and policy reform, or whether, given political concerns, assisting individual outlets or journalists is a more appropriate approach.

Ideally, missions would be able to engage in a holistic, sectoral support strategy much like the one outlined by the MDP program in Russia, but limited budgets and technical capacity constrain such endeavors. As a result, difficult choices must be made based on which targets of opportunity will yield longterm sustainable results. Support for media outlets raises issues regarding choice and duration of support. There are pros and cons to targeting particular outlets versus a more ad-hoc, inclusive approach. Direct support to one outlet may tend to bias the



The Asian Thinker

A Quarterly Bilingual Peer-Reviewed Journal for Social Sciences and Humanities

reporting which comes from that outlet in favor of the U.S. donor, and may overdevelop the outlet in relation to the context in which it exists. As a result, it may not be sustainable in the long term and it may have less credibility.

Support for many outlets, on the other hand, may distribute limited resources so widely that little is achieved in terms of impact. At times, it is more important to have alternative voices in the short term rather than sustainable outlets, particularly in post-conflict or transitional environments. If these alternative voices, however, espouse viewpoints critical of U.S. foreign policy, some might question the wisdom of continued support for them. Others may see this as an indicator of independence. 3 3 Many USAID intermediaries who are engaged in training journalists or supporting independent outlets report that this is a problem that will not go away "The Committee believes the sustainability of non-state-controlled media is critically important..

.Capacity building through training in commercial management and basic journalism, as well as development of an independent media infrastructure are all necessary elements to further enhancing economic and political reform."— The Senate Foreign Operations Bill for 1998 10 Role of Media in Democracy Such dilemmas highlight the need for clear distinctions between media assistance and public information campaigns that promote U.S. policies and viewpoints. Democratic transitions may not be strengthened through the creation of a media which, while free from its own government control, espouses views of foreign governments and reflects their interests. An outlet's credibility depends on its ability to report news freely. One of the most important issues to address before engaging in media sector support is whether to fund local actors directly or to rely on U.S. private voluntary organizations as intermediaries. Funding local actors can be costeffective, yet it may be time consuming to monitor recipients, and some may have such limited administrative capacity that they can not manage the money or activities. Relying on intermediaries is beneficial particularly in some political contexts since this distances the local actor from U.S. policies and politics, as well as the substantial accounting requirements associated with USAID funding. As outlined in the next sub-section, accurately defining the problem faced by the media sector and must be "creatively managed." On the one hand, support for programs comes from U.S.



taxpayers' money so it is naive to think that there would be political support for activities which appear, at face value, to develop voices critical of the United States and its policies. On the other hand, the ultimate goal of journalism training or outlet support is to develop the capacity for professional, objective reporting. If this reporting is critical of the United States or its policies, then in some respects this should be seen as a sign of success.

When relying on intermediaries to channel U.S. funds for media activities, the instrument for doing so is very important to protect the beneficiaries from excessive U.S. interference. Where grants are used instead of contracts, more flexibility is allowed, and less oversight expected. Many field missions, however, use contracts to hire intermediaries so that they can have direct influence in programs and even participant selection, and, as a result, manage the activities in such a way as to avoid raising concerns.

will lend itself to a particular programmatic approach. A final decision on which approach to adopt should then be based on an analysis of the targets of opportunity, the feasibility of activities, and USAID's comparative advantage in carrying out these activities. B. Identifying a Programmatic Approach In designing a media sector support strategy, a key undertaking is an analysis of the problem to inform the adoption of an appropriate programmatic approach to forward media sector development. These approaches may take a number of forms: shaping the legal enabling environment, strengthening constituencies for reform, removing barriers to access, supporting the capitalization of media, and/or training. Ideally, of course, programs would undertake a combination of these approaches to provide a holistic mix of activities.

However, understanding the political concerns as well as financial and technical constraints, missions may be able to adopt only one or two approaches at a time. This strategic approach will present five programmatic approaches, or "menu options," from which democracy officers should calculate trade-offs based on the country-specific concerns and priorities, financial constraints, and available technical assistance/capacity.

Media Use and the Development of Democratic Citizenship



I think few people will protest if I argue that the media constitute powerful socialization arenas for young people in contemporary society. The fact that media are embedded in most parts of young people's everyday life seems to mean that it is, as Livingstone and Hargrave (2006) write, "implausible to suggest that they have no influence, whether positive or negative". Some researchers argue that media activities are essential in the horizontal networks that play an increasingly significant role, compared to the vertical relations in family and school, with regard to socialization and cultural transmission (Pasquier 2002).

A reasonable hypothesis is that media-related activities also play an important role in political socialization or more precisely in the development of civic identities, political orientations, values, skills and patterns of political participation in the period from adolescence to young adulthood (cf. Dahlgren 2007, Dahlgren and Olsson 2007, McLeod 2000). Studying media-related mechanisms and processes in the development of civic identities would seem to be a very important part of the research on media and democracy. However, media activities should not be studied in isolation.

As Livingstone (2002) argues, the media are so important in young people's everyday life because they are an integral part of relations and communication in the family, in school and among peers. In a new research programme recently developed at Örebro University, in collaboration with a number of international scholars, it is our ambition to set up a large-scale longitudinal study on processes of political socialization in the interrelations between different contexts of everyday life. In media studies, the literature on young people and their relations to politics has largely been influenced by an optimistic as opposed to a pessimistic point of view (Buckingham 2000, Livingstone 2002, Loader 2007). From the pessimistic point of view, it has been argued that the preconditions for political citizenship (active participation and power) have partly disappeared and it has been replaced by a consumer society, a selfcentred individualistic culture based on privatised lifestyles, and a political system that effectively excludes not only young people, but most of the people.

Political ignorance, cynicism, distrust in politicians and political institutions, political apathy, decrease in voting and membership in political parties, are just rational responses to real powerlessness. Media consumption is referred to as a driving force causing significant changes in youth culture and political culture.

Young people do not participate enough in political institutions, they do not learn about politics from the news, they are fed up with politics, however they do spend considerable time on media



entertainment and consumption. The optimists, on the other hand, stress the opportunities for new forms of democratic involvement and public debates.

They see the decrease in voting and membership in political parties and traditional organizations not necessarily as signs of political ignorance or apathy, but as signs of a more pluralistic political culture, including new forms of political participation, engagement and protests, and a more diversified public sphere, growing partly out of new communication technologies.

Media entertainment has not necessarily diverted people's interest away from politics, but the forms of political engagement have changed. Coleman (2007) argues that "it is not young people who have disengaged from politics ... but contemporary political culture that has become disconnected from the language, values and aspirations of young people".

Those adhering to this perspective argue that there is a growing gap between the culture, practices and institutions of traditional politics, on the one hand, and the contemporary media and lifestyle-oriented youth culture, on the other. This perspective focuses on informal relations, interaction outside traditional political institutions, and on the varieties of possible public engagement available online. In this area of research on media and the development of civic orientations, which I believe is very important, we can see a recent trend moving from mainly theoretical and partly speculative debates and diagnoses of what is good and bad, towards more empirical research on the media and civic orientation (see, e.g., Dahlgren and Olsson 2007, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007).

Previously research on media and political socialization has been highly focused on the importance of news consumption. The low level and decline in news consumption among youth is well documented (Buckingham 2000, MedieSverige 2007), and it is commonly assumed that this can explain the low levels of political knowledge and the decrease in voting (Buckingham 2000).

However, in a situation in which the Internet has radically changed the patterns of media use among young people, it is perhaps not so relevant to study the effects of a decrease in traditional forms of news consumption. 51 Research on Media and Democracy A more interesting question is what the new forms of online-based activities really mean in terms of political socialization and civic orientations.

Buckingham (2000 p 217) draws the following conclusions: "While they (young people) may be alienated from political parties, from voting and from other conventional forms of political



activity, young people are nevertheless seen to be developing a broader, and no less valid, form of politics, that reflects changing social and historical circumstances.

This is certainly an important response, although the evidence would suggest that young people's active involvement in these 'new' forms of politics is still confined to a small minority." While some researchers have stressed the social withdrawal effect of media use, others have presented empirical support for the idea that media consumption has created new forms for public connectedness and extended the group of people informed about politics.

Regarding the role of the Internet in political socialization, there is an important debate going on between the normalization thesis and the expanding thesis. Empirical studies have shown that online activities tend to normalize the off-line gap and inequality in political engagement. Those already interested use the Internet to reinforce their levels of engagement, and the less engaged use the Internet in a way that makes them even more disengaged and politically inactive.

But there is also a growing number of studies questioning the normalization thesis by showing that it is partly different groups of young people who are engaged in online politics and traditional forms of politics, and that the Internet in fact has a strong potential to expand the group of politically active individuals (Couldry et al. 2006, Krueger 2002, Norris 2001, Gibson et al. 2005). This is just one of a number of important empirical questions concerning the media and the development of democratic citizenship that I feel we have to pay attention to.

Conclusion

These findings illustrate that media performance is clearly related to at least some aspects of the functioning of a democratic regime. Therefore, given its relevance for democracy, it can be concluded that the discussion over whether media fall short of or fulfil the normative demands imposed on them is highly significant.

My findings also question the general and sweeping assumptions that both the 'media malaise' and the 'mobilisation theories' make about the state of media and democracy. Ultimately, both perspectives could benefit from considering comparative empirical evidence that distinguishes between different aspects of media performance and their influence on different elements of democracy.

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