

## Media and Communication in Governance: It's time for a rethink

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**ABSTRACT:** Governance strategies have been generally poor at integrating media and communication issues into their analysis, research and strategic plans. This article considers the reason for this, some of which are rational. It argues that the impact of changing media and communication landscapes on governance outcomes is increasing, that the way in which the media is conceptualized in relationship to governance needs a rethink and that governance policy needs to find better ways of prioritizing it. This article makes four main points:

- Any debate about the role of media in governance is likely to be contested and divided into arguments around effectiveness and values. This contestation makes it especially difficult for media issues to be properly integrated into governance strategies. This difficulty should be confronted rather than ignored.
- The current consensus-based development system is dependent on reaching board agreement among highly diverse political cultures. Such a system does not provide an effective platform from which to devise meaningful strategic action on an issue as politically charged, and apparently divisive, as integrating support for free media into development strategies.
- Governance actors focus on supporting effective institutions. Where governance strategies do include the media, they are often designed to support more effective and sustainable media institutions. This focus is important and necessary but limited. Some of the greatest media and communication changes shaping governance outcomes are being played out at the societal rather than institutional level. Media support strategies need to adjust to this reality.
- The transformation in people's access to media, information and communication continues to accelerate with both positive and negative consequences for governance. It is not clear that these changes are leading to more informed societies which, for most governance actors, is why a free and plural media is most valued. Supply driven strategies are not necessarily being complemented by increased citizen demand for such information.

The article concludes by suggesting some ways forward.

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### I. THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN GOVERNANCE:

The role of the media and freedom of expression in relation to governance is difficult to summarize, with debates reaching back millennia. As Francis Fukuyama documents, Emperor Qin- the founder of the first unified Chinese state in the third century B.C. - saw control of ideas as fundamental to his state building project. Two millennia later, the extreme opposite approach to state building was articulated by Thomas Jefferson in his famous quote, "If I had to choose between government without newspaper, and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter". Any development discussion on the role of media in governance is inextricably enmeshed in a set of debates about effectiveness, and a set of debates about values. The debates about effectiveness tend to revolve around the tension between the efficiency and stability of government, or alternatively around the accountability, sustainability and responsiveness of any governance system. The debates about values are about how much any governance system should enshrine a respect for human does not try to reconcile these tensions but does argue that any attempt to deal with the role of media in development does need to ensure that such tensions, often submerged, are surfaced, examined and interrogated.

Currently, the role of the media in governance strategies is inchoate in the development system. Relatively small sums are spent on media support, there are very few donors who have departments or specialists working on the issue, the role of media and communication is rarely prioritized in development research or among development think tanks, and there is substantial divergence among development actors about what the media, in governance terms, is actually expected to deliver in terms of results.

There are, in simplistic terms, four reasons why development actors currently invest in media support or believe support for media is important.

1. To build an independent media sector as an intrinsic good in and of itself, essential to the functioning of a democratic society and a key platform for freedom of expression.

2. To enhance the accountability of governments to citizens, often in order to improve service delivery and state responsiveness, improve state-citizen relations, support more informed democratic/electoral decision-making, or shift social norms to decrease public tolerance of corruption or poor governance.
3. To improve debate, dialogue and tolerance especially in fragile or conflicted societies, increase the availability of balanced, reliable and trustworthy information, reduce the likelihood of hate speech or inflammatory media likely to exacerbate conflict, enhance social cohesion or build the legitimacy of weak governments in fragile contexts.
4. To create demand for services and use the media as an instrument to achieve development objectives including working to shift behaviors or changing the social norms that prevent such uptake, such as distrust of vaccinations.

These areas are not mutually exclusive, but they do tend to reflect the sometimes siloed thinking that prevents joined-up strategic programming across governance spheres. Strategies to support the media within the context of democracy and human rights bring together donors, media and development actors who share normative assumptions about its importance. Those working in the conflict and stability field tend to be more skeptical and questioning about the value of investing in the media, more rarely making it a priority (except to invest in strategic communications to attract loyalty). Those focused on accountability are interested first and foremost in results (is an investment in the media better than an investment in, say, an independent judiciary?), rather than democratic concerns.

## **II. MEDIA AND GOVERNANCE: AN INSTITUTIONAL OR SOCIETAL LENS?**

This problem is exacerbated by conceptual difficulties of defining what we mean by media. To take just two examples, do we use an institutional lens, looking only at those broadcast, print or online entities which have a clear organizational foundation and which clearly act, as a set of institutions in relation to the state or other loci of power? Or do we use a societal lens, looking at all the ways in which people actually access information and communicate in the 21st century? If the first, a governance support strategy would put in place a set of measures designed first and foremost to support the institutional independence, professionalism and sustainability of media in the country. If the second, a strategy would understand first and foremost how people were accessing information and using communication and, depending on what people (especially, perhaps, poor people) said they wanted (for example, more trusted and relevant news or platforms for debate), put in place a programme to support that.

Whichever lens we look through reveals a picture of extraordinary change. The number, diversity and character of media institutions is exploding, especially in the developing world, sometimes releasing phenomenal and positive democratic energy, and sometimes resulting in highly polarized, factional and occasionally hate-filled public spheres. In Afghanistan, for example, the number of TV and radio stations has expanded by around 20% per year, and there are more than 75 terrestrial TV stations and 175 FM radio stations. Growth in other countries, such as neighbouring Pakistan, has been faster still.

From a societal perspective, viewed through the lens of how people access information and the choices available to them, we have reached a situation which has never existed before. One characteristic is access to satellite as well as domestic media, but the more powerful one is that for the first time in history, humanity is soon to become almost ubiquitously connected, with almost everyone on the planet having some kind of access to a mobile phone. The extraordinary decentralisation of communication is fundamentally shifting political and economic relationships, disrupting power relationships between institutions and networks, elites and masses, old and young, and states and societies. As this article argues, both lenses remain relevant, profound changes are taking place, they have important implications for governance policy, but they are complex, contrary and, of course, highly context specific.

## **III. AN INSTITUTIONAL LENS:**

Much current governance thinking would suggest we should continue to view the role of media through a traditional institutional lens. "Political institutions that distribute power broadly in society and subject it to constraints are pluralistic. Instead of being vested in a single individual or a narrow group, political power rests with a broad coalition or a plurality of groups", argue James A. Robertson and Daron Acemoglu at the start of their book, *Why Nations Fail*. In its conclusion, they ask "What can be done to kick-start or perhaps just facilitate the process of empowerment and the development of inclusive political institutions... one actor, or set of actors can play a transformative role in the process of empowerment: the media. Empowerment of society at large is difficult to coordinate and maintain without widespread information about whether there are economic and political abuses by those in power". It is tempting given such analysis and the focus of so much governance efforts to invest in the creation of "effective institutions", to suggest that the media should become far greater priority than it currently is.

So far so impressive, but arguably history can only tell us so much about the role of the media and communication in a very different 21st century, Acemoglu and Robertson, like other giants of political science, including North et. al. (2009) and Fukuyama (2011), root much of their analysis in the lessons to be learned from human history. There have been acknowledged and well-studied governance disjunctures attributed to historical changes in communication technology but it is not clear how much the lessons of human history prepare us for understanding the governance implications of a ubiquitously connected world.

#### **IV. A SOCIETAL LENS:**

The limitations of such an institutional lens are highlighted by the most recent and often cited example of how shifting media and communication landscapes helped spark transformative change- the 2011 Arab Revolutions. These were, of course, rooted in economic and political marginalization of an increasingly young, more educated and deeply frustrated people living in governance systems that were insufficiently concerned about or capable of working in their interests. But they were substantially sparked by fresh access to independent satellite media which disrupted their government's monopoly on information, and enabled by access to new technologies allowing people to connect and organize outside of government-controlled spaces.

These changes in the media and communication environment were not, however, principally institutional or organizational in character. In none of the Arab Revolution countries did the institutional character of the media substantially change in the run up to the revolutions. State broadcasters did not become substantially more independent, restrictions on non-state media were not noticeably less severe, newspapers did not (with some exceptions of growth in online news media), enjoy a fresh lease of life. What changed was access to communication technologies, especially mobile telephony, and access to independent broadcasters like the BBC and Al Jazeera through the rapid spread of satellite television. The media did not become more important as a sharper of governance outcomes because media institutions within the countries performed differently. They changed because societies were able to access information from outside their societies that revealed a different reality to the one covered by their own media, and because society had a new means through which it could communicate with itself unmediated by government or other controls.

In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, much of the governance analysis of the media has focused on its capacity to improve state-society relationships, making the state more accountable and more responsive. However, one of the greatest challenges facing the country lies as much with society as it does with government. It is how the citizens of a deeply divided nation that has suffered decades of conflict can rebuild a sense of shared identity and common purpose. Any discussion on the development of effective institutions in a country like Afghanistan would seem to be incomplete unless it incorporates some analysis of what the role of the different media institutions are in its future, and how they can best be supported.

In most societies, the media has a significant effect on governance outcomes but that effect is diverse, complex and open to different interpretations. The divisions and conflict in Iraq have been fuelled-but also sometimes ameliorated- by the deeply polarized ethno-sectarian character of much of the media in the country. The rapid liberalization of the media in Kenya in the first decade of this country led to a huge increase in the number of media institutions in the country, including the emergence of local language radio stations. For some this liberalization led to hate radio and the fuelling of violence around the 2007/8 elections- but for others laid the groundwork for the astonishing creative digital and media economy and vibrant democracy that has emerged in recent years.

So the shifting way in which societies access media and communication through new technologies is increasingly important, but the role of traditional media institutions in society still matters and in many countries matters more than they ever have in shaping governance outcomes both for good and ill. What may matter most, however, is whether societies are in fact become more-or -less informed as a result of these changes. It is the contention of this paper that in the 21st century, good governance outcomes will depend strongly on the existence of informed societies. Without an informed society, democratic politics will be stranded as citizens find themselves bereft of the kinds of information they need to exercise a vote or exert political influence of the kind likely to advance their concerns and interests. Without an informed society, neither economic nor political systems work well.

The transformation in media systems and in information and communication technologies are leading to increased societal access to information but there is little evidence to suggest that this is always translating into more informed societies. An informed society depends on citizens having access to a media that is independent if undue control that they can trust and is reasonably accurate. Attempts to control, co-opt, manipulate and intimidate media and other communication systems are increasing and arguably succeeding. Governments have always sought to control and often monopolize the media and continue in many countries to do so. Increasingly, government attempts to control the media are being complemented by those of factional, ethnic, religious, financial and other actors who are investing substantial resources and efforts in either creating

or co-opting media and online spaces to advance is mounting that people in many societies, especially in fragile states, do not have access to a media they trust or which they feel is making them more informed.

## V. WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

This article started by arguing that support for the media, or broader strategies capable of bringing about more informed societies, are not well prioritized in governance action or thinking. Before making suggestions what might be done to change this, it is important to acknowledge there are sometimes good reasons why this does not happen already. Most development action is governed by consensus, whether defined in the millennium Development Goals and what will replace them later this year, or through the many other development agreements reached through the UN, the OECD or other international actors.

There are four reasons why it is difficult to galvanize a consensus round the role of the media in governance and why, consequently, it tends to be a relatively low priority in governance strategies and policy.

The first is political. Some developing country governments see support for media as an excuse to impose conditions on development assistance. Specifically, some associate media assistance with an assertive democracy promotion agenda that was especially prevalent in the United States and elsewhere in the 1990s and 2000s. Attempts by western donors to integrate the media into donor strategies aimed at fostering accountability are met with resistance by some emerging development partners. UN actors often find it very difficult to prioritize media support in country strategies if governments oppose such support.

The second and closely linked reason is architectural. A central principle of the development, effectiveness agenda, and the development architecture that supports it is country ownership of development support strategies. Aid is determined principally by what developing country governments say they need in order to advance the interests and well-being of their people. For the reasons outlined above, country governments very rarely request support for the development of a free and plural media.

The third problem is evidential. While there is a great deal of evidence on the role of media in democracy and governance, the evidence base for the impact of media support programmes is less compelling. Donors and development actors looking for clear research telling them what they can expect to achieve from investing in any particular support strategy to media can be frustrated, especially when so few have their own mechanisms for evaluating the investments they do make in this area. This evidence base is improving rapidly, but there remains work to be done here.

Fourth, the media is particularly unamenable to the kind of organization necessary to deliver quantifiable results most donors need to justify the funds they invest. Unlike other national institutions designed to provide a check on power, like the judiciary or the parliament, the media is neither unitary nor formal in status, but, rather, an intensely, complex, competitive, adaptive and rapidly changing institutional ecosystem. While it is true that evidence exists to account for a judiciary, it might be simpler and easier to track results of a programme designed to support judicial reform than media reform.

These are some of the operational difficulties inherent in getting more concerned and effective support to media. There are other reasons, however, why the consensus required to underpin real development engagement in this area is becoming more, rather than less, difficult to secure.

## VI. SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE:

How people communicate and how they access information is likely to shape political and governance outcomes as never before, and the influence on governance outcomes (both positive and negative) of information-empowered societies seems likely to escalate further. This is as true, if not more so, in fragile states. The ways in which information is controlled or liberated are likely to play out very differently in different countries. Impacts can be democratically, socially and economically liberating or can have the effect of enhanced political polarization, extremism and violence. What is difficult to discern is a clear focused, evidence-led response from the governance community to these issues. And, because any discussion of the role of media and communication is inherently political, value laden and difficult to pin consensus around, it is unlikely that such issues will easily and clearly be prioritized in, for example, the post-2015 development framework. We need to find fresh ways of thinking, discussing and generating action around these governance issues, some of which will be characterized by consensus and some of which will inevitably mean different development actors pursuing different strategies.

Some suggestions for the future are briefly outlined here:

**Navigating Difference:** a post-2015 development consensus will be reached, but it will be implemented by development actors with fundamentally different value systems, political and development beliefs and heritages and approaches to governance. As this paper has argued, the role of the media in society has a tendency to expose differences particularly starkly. The solution to this is not simply to expect agreement from different actors, or for actors to abandon or dilute their fundamental beliefs when they design their development

strategies. These issues and differences need to be surfaced, debated and tested rather than masked by the natural tendency of development actors to achieve consensus. This should not prevent consensus and agreement being reached between different actors but issues that escape the consensus- such as the future of the media, communication and an informed society- should be explicitly flagged and approaches devised that reflect their importance.

**Acknowledging the problem of a normative approach:** It is important for media to be free and plural for the sustainably successful systems of democratic governance. Such beliefs have informed much media support to date. However, such normative assertions are not necessarily the most useful departure point for an effective governance strategy in this area, particularly given criticism that overly normative approaches have had led to negative governance outcomes such as the emergence of hate media. An approach rooted in evidence and experience is needed, and one that acknowledges the harm that the media and communication can wreak, as well as the promise they hold. Acknowledging that an overly normative approach can be ineffective is likely to lead to a more thought-through strategy. This has its limits. For many of us-including myriad actors and partners in developing countries- issues of political freedom, freedom of expression and a free media are not amenable to consensus or even negotiation. If the development system cannot agree on integrating these issues into the international development consensus, then it needs to find a way of acting on them outside of that consensus.

**History has its limits:** Much of the most respected and insightful political science literature has rooted its analysis and conclusions on the lessons from human history of how political order and successful political and economic systems have emerged. It is not the place of a short article like this to question such analysis, but governance strategies should give some consideration to the possibility that a fresh set of conditions exist that have not existed before in history. Such ubiquitous access to information and communication has never existed before and we are, quite probably, entering uncharted territory when it comes to the impacts on governance outcomes.

**The need for evidence and analysis:** While media support organizations are producing increasing amounts of evidence and analysis in this area, there is much more limited research and evidence emerging from governance researchers and policy institutions. The evidence-based guidance available to governance cadres in development agencies remains limited and insufficiently useful to guide day-to-day decision-making.

**Bringing together media and new technologies:** What matters most is not the technology through which information and communication travels, but how people are informed and the effects of information flows and sources on state-citizen and other relationships in society. A fragmented analysis that looks at the role of media and new technologies in isolation from each other is not necessarily a useful lens through which to approach these issues.

**Thinking politically, doing development differently:** Much current governance attention is focused on understanding the political economy of the countries in which development support takes place, and in finding new approaches to development that recognize political complexity. The issue highlighted in this paper could usefully be more prominently featured in and contribute to those debates.

**Clarity of focus and a governance forum:** If the arguments advanced in this paper are accepted-that the issue of an informed society is an important but relatively neglected component of governance thinking and that the difficulty of achieving consensus in this area suggest that the issue will not be automatically prioritized through conventional development mechanisms-something specific needs to happen to take forward the issue. A new mechanism or forum will be required to establish a clear governance framework, research agenda and clear guidance to development actors in this field.

**The media needs support:** Journalists are being killed in record numbers, freedom of expression is under attack as never before. A governance community which prides itself on thinking more politically cannot pretend that these issues are of no concern to development thinking or action. Moreover, while perhaps a decade ago the market was increasingly providing the conditions for independent media and journalism to survive and thrive, increasingly there is a market failure when it comes to the kind of journalism that can hold power to account and best support an informed society. Market failures which result in negative development outcomes are what the aid system exists to solve. For all the political complexity, messiness and difficulty in reaching consensus-based action, this is an issue that the development system can no longer ignore in the way that it has.

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