

Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform



The problem: Good governance remains a global challenge

Today the world faces multiple challenges in governance, transparency, accountability, and inclusivity of development. The spread of accountability and transparency has been extraordinary, with more countries scoring higher on international aggregate indicators of governance, press freedom, and transparency. Nevertheless, these indicators also suggest that in many countries the advance of good governance has stagnated or even reversed.

Reforms are urgently needed to improve the responsiveness, transparency, effectiveness, and accountability of governance institutions so that public services work for the poor as well as the rich.

Within the broad context of the major issues facing the international development community, this book focuses on the performance of the news media as an institution in addressing these challenges.

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The book: News media as public sentinel

This book approaches the issue of news media and governance with three broad questions. First, a normative approach asks: *What ideal roles should media systems play to strengthen democratic governance and thus bolster human development?*

Second, an empirical approach considers independent evidence derived from cross-national comparisons and from selected case studies, asking: *Under what conditions do media systems actually succeed or fail to fulfill these objectives?*

Third, a strategic approach asks: *What policy interventions work most effectively to close the substantial gap that exists between the democratic promise and performance of the news media as an institution?*

A wide range of development specialists from academia and practice analyze these three questions, quote evidence, present case studies, and discuss recommendations for policy makers.

In reply to the first question, we identify three ideal roles of the news media: watchdog, agenda setter, and gatekeeper in the public forum. The chapters in the book examine how the news media function as an institution against these ideal benchmarks, using systematic cross-national empirical analysis, detailed selected case studies derived from a wide range of low- and medium-income societies, as well as different types of regimes found in all regions around the globe.

The solution: Policy recommendations

In this edited volume, we conclude that a substantial gap exists between the ideals that are widely articulated in liberal democratic theory and the practices that are commonly found in states around the world. This gap needs to be addressed, and the book presents a wide range of effective policy interventions and programs that can be implemented by national stakeholders and the international community.

Reform the role of the state

Strengthening the framework of civil liberties, reforming state broadcasting, and establishing

effective and independent broadcasting regulatory agencies can provide bases for reforming the state.

- *Expand the framework of civil liberties and remove legal curbs on the media:* Reform any overarching constitutional principles, laws, or administrative procedures that inhibit the independence of the press (especially fundamental freedoms of expression and publication). Efforts should be directed toward respecting the rights of journalists and revoking punitive legislation against independent media (including punitive taxing, control of official advertising, control of printing presses, and licenses for the importation of newsprint).
- *Turn state broadcasters into public service broadcasters:* State control of the media inhibits the capacity of the news media to be watchdogs, agenda-setters, and gate-keepers. Convert state-controlled broadcasters into genuine public service broadcasters (PSB), which are editorially independent of government and protected against political and commercial interference. They should provide a wide range of programming to educate, inform, and entertain the public, while taking into account ethnic, cultural, religious, and regional diversity. Public service broadcasting should be governed by an independent governing board, and should be financed with public funding through specific mechanisms that protect their independence.
- *Ensure the independence of broadcasting regulatory bodies:* Because broadcasting regulation is unavoidable, it is crucial that bodies overseeing this process be truly independent. The powers and duties of oversight bodies should be determined by law. The oversight body should operate transparently and in the interest only of the public. The regulatory body should be required to include public participation, be subject to judicial oversight, and be formally accountable to the public. Finally, a regulatory body should be required to publish an annual report.

Use needs diagnostics and media performance indicators

Strong monitoring and evaluation frameworks promote a holistic, consistent, and efficient approach to media reform. Apply systematic media

audits and indicators that are sensitive to regional contexts prior to any policy intervention or the implementation of any program.

- *Incorporate media indicators and audits into governance diagnostics and needs analysis:* Incorporate diagnostics for assessing the state of the media system at the country level prior to any strategic interventions. This diagnostic work can be informed by a set of disaggregated indicators, such as country profiles, or quality of governance assessment frameworks.

Address problems of market failure

Be aware of the ambiguity of liberal markets and competition. They can be an asset to watchdog reporting because state influence can be curbed, but they can also be an obstacle because commercial pressures often make the media reluctant to hold the powerful to account.

- *Make a pluralistic and diverse media system your overarching policy objective.* Diversity should be achieved through a regulatory environment encouraging a wide range of media ownership, outlets, contents, interests, and political perspectives. It is advisable for donors to support small independent media to offset the potentially negative effects of political and economic pressures on the mainstream media.

Prioritize institutional, not individual, capacity building: Regard the media system in each country as one of the core institutions affecting governance. Ask: what kind of media systems will help to deliver democratic governance? An institutional view of the media requires a holistic approach to media development, not piecemeal work concentrating mainly on the short-term efforts.

Good practice suggestions on the regulation of private broadcasting include: positive content obligations; special content rules during elections; no restrictions on broadcast content beyond those that apply to all forms of expression; codes of conduct and self-regulation; sanctions for breaches of content rules that are proportionate to the harm done; equitable frequency distribution between public service, commercial, and community broadcasters; “must carry” rules for cable and satellite networks; public access channels.

- *Strengthen media markets and media industries, and support media infrastructure:* The media sector needs to be regarded as an important development sector because it can be a massive creator of jobs and a generator of wealth, especially in developing countries. The kind of economic development initiatives directed toward other economic and social development sectors need to be directed to the media sector as well.
- Commission sector studies and develop plans of action for sector development and to support institutions that will strengthen the entire sector. Further suggestions to strengthen sustainable media markets include: tailor funds and bridge finance gaps that may exist due to late returns of donor investments; use existing finance schemes by increasing awareness of existing funding opportunities among the media sector; facilitate the funding of equipment; create mechanisms for media outlets to share technical facilities; identify opportunities to collectively purchase equipment; support equipment and skill upgrades.

Build the institutional capacity of the journalism profession

The ideal roles of the news media as watchdogs, agenda-setters, and gate-keepers have implications for the values, norms, and professional practices of journalists. These roles also have implications for media standards of training, accreditation, organizational routines, and professional associations.

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to deliver democratic governance? An institutional view of the media requires a holistic approach to media development, not piecemeal work concentrating mainly on the short-term efforts. Change will happen faster if professional development, economic sustainability, legal-enabling environment, and media literacy are addressed simultaneously.

- *Support sustainable professional development programs and expand institutional capacity:* Journalists need support with regard to professional skills, journalism ethics, and management skills. Professional development programs are most effective when they are sustained, especially through existing platforms of learning. Lasting solutions arise from building the institutional capacity of journalism, supporting professional associations, and supporting independent press councils for self-regulation.

Empower civil society organizations

The capacity of the news media to be effective watchdogs, agenda-setters, and gatekeepers depends crucially on the vibrancy of associational life in a particular society. Organized groups help to inform and mobilize the news media on specific issues.

- *Encourage links between news media and the rest of civil society:* Better cooperation between the news media and the rest of civil society is crucial. The news media need the active support of groups in civil society in order to strengthen the commitment of each political community to free, diverse, and independent media. NGOs, community-based organizations, and social movements cannot be effective without the active support of free, diverse, and independent news media. Media watch groups

or observatories are a good way of holding the news media themselves accountable and encourage them to focus on the public interest.

Expand public access and build media literacy

Widespread public access is an essential condition for an effective media. The capacity of the government to have the means to communicate with all parts of the territory it governs is fundamentally important to both state effectiveness and nation building. The news media play a crucial role in creating that sense of community. Moreover, access to the news media is integral to competent citizenship. Formal media freedoms have little meaning if citizens cannot make use of the media.

- *Expand public access to new media and rights to information:* Close gaps in access to media (including the digital divide in information and communication technologies, as well as the skills and resources that are necessary to give widespread access to traditional broadcast media). Technological innovations can reduce some of the technological hurdles to information access in poorer societies (including availability of wind-up radios, solar-power batteries, wireless connectivity, US\$100 rugged laptops, Internet cafés, community telephone and Internet centers, and cell phones with data services, e-mail, and text messaging).
- *Support media literacy as part of building citizenship skills:* Support and scale up efforts to promote media literacy. Teach citizens knowledge and provide them with tools so that they can use the media as autonomous and rational citizens.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

CommGAP is funded through a multi-donor trust fund. The founding donor of this trust fund is the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

CommGAP has launched a blog entitled People, Spaces, Deliberation to share ideas about the role of the democratic public sphere in governance among a growing global community of practice with members who are united in their commitment to improve governance and accountability in developing countries. The blog is addressing issues such as accountability, governance, media development, anti-corruption, post conflict environments, and public opinion.

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