

Media Literacy: Understanding the News

By Susan D. Moeller

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This report is the first in a series of three on the status of U.S. and international understanding of and funding for media literacy.



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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, aims to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development.

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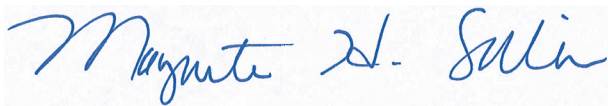
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) commissioned this study of media literacy programs for the general public as part of a three-part series looking at media literacy trends around the world. The purpose of this report is to examine efforts to promote public understanding of the role of media in a democracy, as well as give the public the skills they need to analyze and participate in the news process. The other reports in this series—*Media Literacy: Citizen Journalists* and *Media Literacy: Empowering Youth Worldwide*—are available for download at <http://cima.ned.org/reports>.

CIMA is grateful to Susan Moeller, an expert on media literacy with many years of experience in this field, for her research and insights on this topic. Any opinions or views expressed within this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent CIMA or NED.

We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.



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Executive Summary

Media literacy training gives the public the tools to be active citizens. It helps people understand the value of news, defend their access to free information, decipher the messages they receive, use their rights of free expression to make their voices heard, and participate in the process of governing.

In regions of the world that lack independent media, citizens cannot elect their best representatives, accurately monitor industry, or judge how to foster healthy development because they are often starved of information and do not know how much trust to place in news sources. Media literacy training is a tool the development sector can use to educate citizens and other stakeholders to better understand the role of information in a democracy and pressure governments to be accountable and to root out corruption. A media literate citizenry is essential to building and sustaining democracy.

Media literacy training creates a demand for accurate and fair news on both traditional and digital media platforms. This encourages checks and balances and democratic debate not just at election time but between elections as well. Teaching the public to be media literate does not mean telling people what to think or do. Rather, creating a media-literate society is a step toward finding better ways to communicate and toward solving humanity's most difficult political and economic problems.

U.S. and international donors in media development and communications for development projects have begun to identify media literacy as a priority, but donors

outside those fields are still learning about the concept. Some of the key arguments for funding media literacy are:

- Support for media helps mission-critical ideas (such as healthcare information) get to the public. Media literacy efforts can then be incorporated into those projects, so that the ideas being communicated will be understood.
- Media literate citizens understand the value of media acting as watchdogs in their societies. Such citizens are also able to thoughtfully monitor the news and information that reaches them. It is more practical to teach the public to be on guard against rumor mongering or hate speech than to try to control the ever-expanding supply of news.
- Funding media literacy supports a shift in tactics that are suited to the new digital information age, which is increasingly a “pull,” as opposed to a “push,” world. Some of the most effective U.S. development programs are those in which funders resist “pushing” their values and instead help citizens “pull” reliable news and information that contribute to their communities and their lives.

This report offers a number of suggestions for agencies, foundations, and organizations that have come to believe, in the words of Alison Bernstein, a vice president of the Ford Foundation, that “the need for media literacy programs has never been greater.”

Among the recommendations:

- **Create a funders' consortium.** Government agencies, private foundations, and international organizations that invest in media development and groups in fields like education and human rights should come together to find common cause in supporting media literacy. The goal of these efforts would be to invest development funds more strategically.
- **Require that coordination among funders, implementers, and in-country partners be written into project proposals.** Such efforts would improve communication and coordination among funders.
- **Track the delivery of media literacy programs in larger projects.** Media literacy programs are rarely funded by themselves; they are typically small components of larger projects. Such media literacy programs should be identified and tracked better so their costs and outcomes can be evaluated.
- **Measure the level of media literacy in developing countries.** The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) should add media literacy as a sixth criterion to the five currently used in its Media Sustainability Index (MSI) to evaluate national and regional media development needs.
- **Do more research on media literacy and create an international center to connect information and efforts.** More multidisciplinary research to help identify problems and opportunities in the field of media literacy needs to be conducted and made widely accessible.
- **Expand the pool of donors funding projects that include media literacy components.** Looking beyond government agencies and foundations, as well as organizations that do not typically fund media development, to help fund media literacy projects could provide additional resources for media literacy efforts.

Methodology

Trying to assess how much of U.S. and international donor funding of media development or communication for development is going toward supporting media literacy training is a bit like trying to measure a cup of water when you are scuba diving. You can get your cup out, but the water flowing into it is almost indistinguishable from the surrounding ocean.

This does not mean, however, that the exercise does not have value. In fact, because there are such significant measurement problems, the donor and implementation sectors need to improve how they assess their projects. Many in the media development field agree that current tracking systems are insufficient and that better tagging of funding and projects on the ground would result in better evaluation and strategic planning.

The problems of measuring aid directed at media literacy training often stem from funders' lack of familiarity with the concept of media literacy: what it is, why they should pay attention to it, and whether they are actually already committing funds to it unawares.

The three reports in this series analyze what the U.S. government, international organizations, and private foundations are doing with media literacy projects or media literacy components of larger media development projects. As the first in the series, this report sets a baseline definition of media literacy for the development sector and summarizes what many in the field currently understand about the topic.

These reports are almost entirely narrative in nature. No institution or agency—whether government, multilateral, or private—was able to provide even ball-park estimates for their support for media literacy. The lack of numbers is not due to secrecy; the institutions and agencies simply had no idea about their investment in the field. None—including foundations that focus on funding media literacy projects—tracked their own support of media literacy in their in-house accounting. This is because such efforts are typically folded into their media development and communication programs, and those in turn are often embedded within general development projects addressing issues such as governance, poverty, democracy, and post-conflict reconstruction. Without consistent identification and accounting of project components, there is no distillation of figures to be had.

Because of the unavoidably qualitative rather than quantitative accounting of support and funding for media literacy programming, this series of reports relies on interviews and case studies about projects that either explicitly or even inadvertently have served media literacy goals. Taken together, the reports outline the arguments for the inclusion of media literacy as a core component in media development projects, in communication for development projects, and in the education of children and youth.

Media Literacy: A Definition for the Development Community

Media literacy is a public good. Literacy—of all kinds—enables communication. It permits the dissemination of ideas across distances. It allows rights and regulations to be learned, understood, assessed, and debated.

Media literacy is also about access to information: enabling citizens to use their rights of free expression, to defend their access to information, to secure their participation in the process of governing, and to help all voices be heard.

At its most basic level, media literacy is about teaching consumers of information how to separate fact from opinion. Media literate individuals know how to:

- **identify** what “news” is and how media, as well as other actors, decide what matters;
- **monitor and analyze** media coverage of people and events;
- **understand** media’s role in shaping global issues.

Media literacy also is about teaching individuals how media can help them exercise their right to freedom of expression. Those who are media literate:

- **defend** media in their oversight of good government, corporate accountability, and economic development (the watchdog role of media);

- **promote** civil society by becoming a responsible part of the communication chain;
- **motivate** media professionals to cover news better by communicating to media organizations their expectations for accuracy, fairness, and transparency.¹

People who are media literate understand how crucial news and information are to creating pluralistic and accountable societies. Media literacy means understanding the value of news and information, the power of media messages, and the role that the public can—and should—play in setting the public agenda. Media literacy programs teach the skills of critical thinking and analysis. They do not direct their audiences how to engage with a topic; rather they prepare them for active and inclusive roles in information societies. Tom Bettag, the former long-time executive producer for *Nightline*, now on the advisory board of the State University of New York, Stony Brook’s News Literacy Center, notes: “It comes down to critical thinking about who is giving this [information] to me, why are they giving it to me, and what backup are they giving to me to help me understand that this is believable.”²

Media literacy increases the demand for news, not just for information or “infotainment.” News is especially critical in a democracy, as Bettag explains, because it is “information that is subject to the rules of journalistic verification.” William Orme,

former policy advisor for the United Nations Development Program, noted that it is much easier to teach media literacy to groups in the developing world than to try to manage the ever-exploding supply of information and propaganda targeted at them. “It’s more useful and practical,” he said, “to try and educate the citizenry to be on guard against hate speech and rumor-mongering or whatever, and have them report it.”³

For the past decade, media literacy has been gaining favor as an academic discipline in

Europe, Asia, and the Americas, so much so that many governments and schools are discussing media literacy as essential for students and in some cases are mandating media literacy courses at all educational levels.

How should those in development define “media literacy”?⁴ To be media literate, a citizen must possess the skills of critical thinking and analysis but must also comprehend the critical importance of free expression and a free press.

Why Media Literacy Matters

Independent media are vital for nurturing democracy through an informed citizenry. Understanding how news and information flow in the modern world is a first step toward demanding fair, accurate, and contextual news and information. “Information is a core need in a democracy,” says Alberto Ibarguen, president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. “You cannot run a democracy without a free flow of information ... which leads to shared values and shared concepts.”⁵

Some advocates of media literacy contend that it is a basic human right. “I think media development should be a human rights argument, the same way I think women’s rights should be a human rights argument,” Orme said. “You can make the same case for women’s rights—that it’s a very effective path—which it is—to social and economic development. But even if you couldn’t make that case empirically, clearly you should still be for women’s rights. By the same argument, you should still be for free expression ... and media literacy.”

Creating an Informed Citizenry

The development sector increasingly understands that free and independent media are an important index of not only political, but economic well-being. Development economists used to contend that elections were sufficient to guarantee not only government accountability but responsible economic development. But as Oxford economist Paul Collier argues in his book, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places*, the West has over-relied on elections as instruments of accountability “relative to everything else.”

In much of the world, journalists are censored or intimidated. Media ownership may be monopolized. In such situations, Collier observes, elections do not automatically bring good governance, corporate accountability and strong economic development, because citizens are uninformed. “Governments have realized that they can evade accountability while still having elections as long as they muzzle the press or buy the press.”

Citizens, he says, “are starved of information, and they don’t even know how much trust to place in information sources that are available to them.” We have learned, he adds, that “elections only work if we complement them with an informed society.”⁶

David Hoffman, president and co-founder of Internews, adds: “Media is a direct part of democracy. You know you can’t have multiparty elections unless you have multi-channels of communication. Who can have democracy without a free media?”⁷

Collier’s and Hoffman’s observations, which are shared by others involved in development,⁸ highlight an essential need for funders and implementers committed to creating and sustaining open and democratic societies around the world.

“If we are building media as a fourth power then the audience should be a fifth power that puts checks and balances on the media,” said Algirdas Lipstas, deputy director of the Open Society Foundation Network Media Program. “To do that they need to be media literate—to understand what media is doing and what media can do.”⁹

Media literacy is increasingly presented as a tool the development sector can use to educate citizens and other stakeholders to pressure government to be accountable and root out corruption. “If you have professional media that spend their days actually trying to understand what people in power are doing, and you have [media literate] citizens that are demanding this ... and that are demanding to be engaged and active and to be involved, that creates a structure by which you can have checks and balances and democratic debate not just at election time but in between elections as well,” explained Bettina Peters, the director of the Global Forum for Media Development.¹⁰

“The basic news literacy argument is that you can’t get the vaccine in someone’s mouth until you get the idea in that someone’s head that the vaccine is good for you,” said Eric Newton, vice president of the Knight Foundation. “Anything any foundation wants to do is going to be less effective in countries with disabled or stressed or repressed information systems and will be easier to accomplish in healthy news and information ecosystems. News literacy is the way we help to improve that news and information ecosystem.”¹¹

In many environments the public does not find the local media to be credible sources of news and information. Mark Whitehouse, IREX’s director of media development, said there is “evidence showing that in a lot of countries we work in, people don’t trust the

media, people don’t see the media as a force for good in their societies necessarily—or they, in many cases, trust what we would call biased media or partisan media more than they might trust media we would consider to be balanced or non-partisan.”¹²

Media Literacy and Economic and Political Markets

With the advent of cheap mobile technologies over the past decade, development agencies have become interested in the business use of information and communications technologies for the poor.

In the United Kingdom, at the Department For International Development (DFID), Sina Odugbemi, now a senior policy and strategy advisor at the World Bank, recalled, funders were initially attracted to how farmers could use the new technologies to get up-to-date information, including best prices of their products.

“Citizen competence, accountability, and other uses came later,” he said. From the economic sphere, interest grew to the political sphere, as Collier outlined. Said Odugbemi about the role of information in making political markets work: “The more informed you are about candidates and their programs, the better your decision-making. [This paralleled] the economic marketplace argument—the better informed you are about products and services the better you are able to act in the economic market.” In the political sphere,

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then, it would be “about transparency and accountability and good governance,” he said.¹³

Recently some donors have supported creating and sustaining independent media projects with one goal being to help citizens improve their media literacy skills, in part because of media’s perceived role in the political environment of the country. Kenya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda are examples where media played key roles in exacerbating political violence and instability.¹⁴

Such attention may be paying off, noted James Deane, head of policy development at the BBC World Service Trust. “Evidence from some recent elections ... shows that voters in some countries are turning away from identity politics—not voting along their usual either ethnic or politically factional lines and instead making decisions based on issues as they see them.” Elections, in Bangladesh and Ghana for example, are evidence of “a higher level of media literacy being reflected,” he said, and a greater ability on citizens’ part to “understand, interpret, and read between the lines” of what they hear.¹⁶

Case Study: Yugoslavia

B92: An independent media voice gives citizens a media literacy lesson

In the midst of the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, when opposition Belgrade radio station B92 began sounding like an arm of Slobodan Milosevic's government, it was not because the independent producers and reporters had been replaced. Nor was the shift in the broadcasts a poor April Fool's joke. Instead, the surprise programming change was the radio station's way of forcing listeners to think carefully and critically about the news they heard. In effect, B92 was telling its listeners: "Don't trust anyone, not even us."

Sasa Vucinic, who served as B92's editor in chief from 1990-1993, recalls the experiment his staff constructed:

"We decided to do a one-day complete change and broadcast as if the government was making the program. ... We replaced all the usual music and voices on the radio, and the news that we wrote was totally pro-government. But if you were listening carefully, it was absolutely detectable that the news was fake. So for example, we had the leader of the opposition write the most disgusting commentary of his own political party, and we had someone else read it on air.

"The reaction was really stunning. Phones in the studio did not stop ringing ... we taped all the calls ... what was coming out of them was literally this incredible violence: 'We will come over there. We will level the radio station. You stole our only hope.'

"We had taken pride in the fact that our listeners were the most educated in the country—you know, academics, intellectuals, and everything. If they only had listened a little more carefully to what the news was. If they had just been listening carefully, if they would literally have just listened to the facts of the messages that were in the broadcasts, they would have understood that the program was fake, but actually nobody did."¹⁵

Vucinic, who is now managing director of the Media Development Loan Fund, likens this distinction between media and media literacy to grocery shopping: "You have to educate the people who are buying the food to understand what they are buying, the characteristics of each type of food. ... It is ultimately the responsibility of all types of serious media outlets to develop their own users and their own listeners to be critical judges of what they are receiving—not just sheep that go left and right wherever the outlet sends them."

How U.S. and International Funders Understand Media Literacy

“Is media literacy teaching people how to understand, read, and interpret media messages? Or is media literacy how to empower people to create media and media messages?” asked Lipstas of OSI. “Well,” he said, “it’s both.”

Government and foundation officers who work in the field of media development understand the value of media literacy: that media literacy helps individuals engage with and make sense of the world, across all sectors and demographics.

In the foundation world especially, program officers in media and journalism see media literacy as a core competency. “Media literacy is a basic skill set, almost akin to being able to read. If you have this media literacy capacity, then you can do all sorts of other critical thinking,” said Calvin Sims, a program officer at the Ford Foundation. “If you lack these critical skills you’re likely to be unable to obtain a job that’s going to position you to move out of whatever impoverished situation you’re in.”¹⁷

But outside that small circle of the initiated, in the general development sector, the phrase “media literacy” is poorly known. Media literacy as a term, noted Mary Myers, an independent consultant in the field, is used

“almost not at all.”¹⁸

Across the board, most funders and implementers who invest in media literacy do so because they want to get a message out to—and understood by—the public. For example, Susan King, vice president for external affairs at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, said “the mission set by our founder was the advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding.” As a result, King said, “What permeates all our grant-making is the need to get a better understanding by engaging the public in these issues which are on the corporation’s agenda.”¹⁹

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— Calvin Sims, program officer at the Ford Foundation

Said Sasa Vucinic, managing director of the Media Development Loan Fund (MDLF), which provides loans for independent news outlets in countries with a history of media oppression: “We believe we’re providing the basic infrastructure

for media literacy to be taught, for media literacy to be an issue, to be understood, to become something you can deal with ... but I have to say that I am still to meet a donor who is funding something like this.”

In the development sector, media have for decades been more likely to be viewed as a line item under “technical assistance” and understood in the role of “communication for development,” than seen as a policy priority in and of themselves. “Policy makers always saw media as a means to

Case Study: Democratic Republic of the Congo

Supporting democracy: Teaching journalism skills and media literacy

While many funders operate in developing countries and work with populations in need, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is a particularly complicated case, given the instability, continuing violence, disease, and famine that in the aftermath of war still result in thousands of deaths each month.

The United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) is funding a \$13 million media project in that country to promote democracy and accountability. Media literacy—for journalists and for their audiences—is a core component of the project. "It's important to promote an understanding of the power of the media and free speech," said Mary Myers, a consultant on the project. The media in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Myers wrote in a paper for a World Bank conference in 2007, are "disorganized, impoverished, and susceptible to corruption. There is a lamentable lack of trust between citizens, the state, and the media."²⁰

"Our program includes courses for journalists and broadcasters—not just the basics of how to write an article or put together a radio broadcast," Myers said, "but about how to behave as a responsible journalist, about ethics, standards, freedoms, and limits. We have particular courses and exchanges for journalists about local elections and about where journalists fit into civil society."

some end—as a way to deliver messages," said Hoffman, of Internews.

"I've always been sort of worried we didn't have media literacy, but when I think about it we sort of do, but we just don't call it that," said Mark Koenig, senior media advisor at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). "That's how a majority of media literacy happens—without our even noticing it ... Community radio, youth media, and internet training for journalists would be three examples of that phenomenon."²²

U.S. media development implementers agree that "media literacy hasn't yet played out very actively in the media development

community," as Persephone Miel, senior advisor at Internews, put it.²²

"Media literacy as a term hasn't fairly or fully taken hold within our media projects, but I think we are conscious of a lot of the elements and have been increasingly so, in trying to incorporate various elements into projects," said IREX's Whitehouse.

International organizations sometimes also address media literacy issues as part of larger projects. "Some of the components of what we now call media literacy have been part of programmatic support in some way or the other for a few years," said the World Bank's Odugbemi. "So to track this field you sort of have to unpack your definition of

media literacy and track those components in the programmatic support we'd been having in the last 10-15 years.”

In Europe, media literacy is being discussed at the ministerial level. Some examples: in the United Kingdom, at Ofcom, the country's independent broadcast, telecommunications, and wireless regulator; in France's Ministry of Education's CLEMI (Centre de Liaison de l'Enseignement et des Medias d'Information—Center for Liaison Between Teaching and Information Media); and the European Charter for Media Literacy, with sponsors and signatories across the continent, is trying to get Europeans to recognize the role of media literacy in creating informed and engaged citizens.²³ Noted Robert Holloway, director of the Agence-France Presse Foundation: “Media literacy is certainly being talked about at a high level and talked about publicly.”

Still, it is a struggle. Deane, of the BBC World Service Trust, argues: “There is a lack of clarity about where media fits within the entire development system, within UNDP, within any of the bilateral agencies, almost none of whom—with the exception perhaps of SIDA [Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency] or USAID—have a clear place within their architecture of how they think about the role of media in relation to citizenship...”

New Media and Media Literacy²⁴

Today “digital literacy” is a term in vogue. As Knight's Newton said: “People who are digitally literate understand how they can use the new digital tools to engage with the news and information ecosystem, to become part of it.”

But “digital literacy” is really a subset of “media literacy.”

The new, digital news media are not just “new,” they are different. As Troy Etulain, senior civil society expert at USAID, observed in a presentation to a World Bank audience: “The very definition of journalism is changing and that is causing us to reconsider what we consider reliable information.”²⁵

It is not just the delivery system that has changed, it is the speed of the delivery system. Speed has changed our news experience, both how quickly we can access a news outlet (we no longer have to wait for the paperboy), and how quickly a news outlet can access information from the field, whether “the field” means a plane that has crashed in the Hudson River off New York City or an earthquake zone in Sichuan province in China. Both of those events were “broken” by Twitter, the 140-character-max micro-messaging site. And when the first “tweets” were sent about the incidents, anyone, anywhere could have had access to them.

The Ford Foundation is especially interested in teaching media literacy skills to the public. “If you have a more educated and critically equipped public, then they will demand more of the products that they get,” said Sims. “In this new digital age ... anybody and everybody can put up a media product. On one hand, that's terrific that such great diversity of voices can participate. On the other hand, you've got a public that is not necessarily well equipped to gauge which products are journalistic, which products are entertainment, which products are partisan.”

In 2005, News Corporation Chairman and CEO Rupert Murdoch gave a speech to the annual convention of the American Society of Newspaper Editors. “Like many of you in this room, I’m a digital immigrant,” he said. “I grew up in a highly centralized world where news and information were tightly controlled by a few editors, who deemed to tell us what we could and should know. My two young daughters, on the other hand, will be digital natives. They’ll never know a world without ubiquitous broadband internet access.”

“The peculiar challenge then,” Murdoch continued, “is for us digital immigrants—many of whom are in positions to determine how news is assembled and disseminated—to apply a digital mindset to a new set of challenges. We need to realize that the next generation of people accessing news and information, whether from newspapers or any other source, have a different set of expectations about the kind of news they will get, including when and how they will get it, where they will get it from, and who they will get it from.”²⁶

“Because of the fast-changing technological picture,” noted the Knight Foundation’s Newton, “the teaching of news literacy/media literacy is both more important than it’s ever been and more difficult than it’s ever been. It’s more important and more difficult because the rapid changes in technology make it easy to become a news illiterate. We may know how to ‘get’ the news from a newspaper, but not how to ‘get’ it on the web or over a cellphone. . . . People talk about digital natives and digital immigrants,” Newton said, “but I think there’s a third group that Murdoch didn’t mention: digital orphans who are left out of the information ecosystem—who have a limited ability to know things.”

Whether one counts oneself or others in the

“native,” “immigrant,” or “orphan” category, the reality is that the proliferation and changes in the kinds and types of news and information sources necessitate the general public being media literate.

“Logically, just the fact that there are so many new sources of information—even without getting into the whole big discussion about whether digital media is of professional quality or not—dramatically increases the need for media education,” MDLF’s Vucinic said.

Training journalists to be better at their craft will not ensure that their audiences will be able to better evaluate media stories, says IREX’s Whitehouse. Nor do they understand why a diversity of media to capture a variety of opinions is important. He said, “that is why there’s been a growing realization that in many ways media development has to be more consumer focused.”

Media Literacy in Societies in Conflict and New Democracies

Accurate news and information is always needed, but nowhere more important than in conflict states. The hate speech that Radio Mille Collines spewed in 1993 and 1994 before and during the genocide in Rwanda, and the ethnically divisive speech on the air in Kenya following the elections in December 2007 dramatically showed how the public needs skills to evaluate and monitor the media.

In transitioning states the temptation has often been to censor or regulate media to prohibit or at least deter divisive speech. But draconian measures by the state to restrict hate speech also have been used to restrict other kinds of news, often information that runs counter to the authorities’ opinions. Media literacy is

Case Study: Sierra Leone

Post-conflict rapprochement: Educating stakeholders to the essential role of media

If media are essential to monitoring the accountability of governments, then it is essential that government officials together with citizens and other stakeholders understand the role that media need to play.

In December 2006, AmericaSpeaks helped facilitate a ‘Public Dialogue’ in Sierra Leone—an event that included media literacy training for the participants.

Following the long civil war, which ended in 2002, Sierra Leone embarked on a process of decentralization, giving local governments and tribal chiefs greater responsibility to provide services to their populations. Citizens are seen as a critical part of the national process of redefining roles. Their active participation in local government is key to establishing national stability and, ultimately, some measure of prosperity.

Media have been understood to be key players in monitoring and evaluating the adherence of local chiefs and officials to the new responsibilities and as conduits for citizens and others to be heard in all their diversity.

AmericaSpeaks led a three-day session for the multiple stakeholders to assess the decentralization process. Using facilitation methods that AmericaSpeaks has pioneered in the United States, local coaches led several hundred participants, (including government ministers, agency and local officials, development partners, NGO representatives, journalists, politicians, and traditional chiefs) in identifying their priorities, discussing in mixed groups, and generating recommendations on moving forward.

“Dialogue took place, new ideas were generated and priorities made,” said Carolyn Lukensmeyer, founder of AmericaSpeaks. Chiefs committed to collaborate with local governments and agreed to their roles, which had been a major source of conflict, she said.²⁷

AmericaSpeaks reminded stakeholders of the roles that media must play if progress is to be made—education, awareness, providing information to help define issues and holding officials accountable. “There’s no point in having the public engage in policy options if they are not fully enough informed to understand the unintended as well as intended consequences of those policies,” she said.

often a better alternative than heavy-handed content controls by state or by quasi-independent broadcasting authorities—such as the imposition of libel and insult laws, which can be used as powerful tools to silence dissent.

Even in countries with an educated citizenry, authorities tend to believe that certain information should be privileged or that some segment of the public needs protection—and that can lead to censorship. “There is often in communications law a tendency or a desire of some people to censor what they don’t like on the basis that so-and-so can’t handle that information,” Charles Firestone, executive director of the Aspen Institute’s Communications and Society Program, observed.²⁸ Yet in the developed as well as the developing world, media monitoring as well as censorship are losing their practical effects.

Today’s digital environments of handheld communication devices and the Internet, and news delivery systems that include text messaging and satellite TV, mean that “no matter how much you may want to censor, with everything coming from all over the world now, you’re not going to be able to censor,” Firestone said.

One appeal of media literacy is that its supporters can argue that censorship can be replaced by education. “What media literacy does is push the responsibility to the receiving end, rather than the production end,” said Firestone.

However, certain members of the development sector, said UNDP’s Orme, believe that “some kind of modulation of the content of media is appropriate because frankly [citizens] don’t have the sophistication and the worldliness to filter out good information from bad.”

MDLF’s Vucinic contends that the populations of new democracies and post-conflict societies are perfectly capable of learning media literacy skills—they just have not had the opportunity to do so. “You can’t really talk about people being media literate in a country in which they have had only government-dominated media because the type of the message they’ve been receiving is just one type of message and it’s total propaganda, right? Only if they have something else as alternative to that—alternative voices—that provide more than one type of a view, can people actually be in a position to have something to choose from and have something to sort through.”

Impediments to Promoting Media Literacy

Several issues impede support for media literacy projects:

Other activities take priority. Health, child survival, and education trump media-related projects, noted one State Department official. For many funders, media development just does not grab their attention, nor are the benefits of media literacy easily quantifiable. In trying to save the world from endemic or epidemic diseases, organizations can total the number of lives lost or saved. By contrast, it is hard to measure the practical effects of media literacy training.

Media literacy projects take time. As one government official phrased it: “Congress likes immediate results, and most media programs don’t produce immediate results.”

There is little coordination or sharing of information. Media development and media literacy often fall between bureaucratic cracks. Little information sharing exists, resulting in a loss of lessons learned. Duplication and overlapping projects often occur. There is no central data bank for who is funding what projects in any given region. Sims, of the Ford Foundation, said, “A better way to do this would be to have a consortium ... of the major media funders in which we create a huge fund. We start to decide what kind of funding we want to do. That way we are more strategic, we can put in more dollars.”

Media literacy projects get lost in other, larger projects. “Tracking how much money we commit to news literacy is a hard question now,” noted Knight’s Newton.

“Our internal coding system does not have news literacy as a category. News literacy is across a band of different grants that we do. We’ve done a lot of it, but we actually don’t know how much we’ve done.”

There is not enough research of audiences or of the level of media literacy in most developing countries. Understanding how a country’s population has access to, understands, and uses media—including new social networking media—would assist donors in the fields of media development and communication for development to target their funds better and measure results.

Currently, IREX’s Media Sustainability Index provides in-depth analyses of the conditions for independent media and assesses how media systems change over time and across borders. According to IREX’s Web site:

“The MSI assesses five ‘objectives’ in shaping a successful media system:

1. Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.
2. Journalism meets professional standards of quality.
3. Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.
4. Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.
5. Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.”²⁹

Developing media literacy as a sixth MSI ‘objective’ would aid the complicated bureaucracies in the State Department, USAID, the World Bank, and other national and multinational agencies in their long-term strategic planning.

Audience research used intelligently can be a valuable tool for funders looking not just for who is saying the right things, but who is making an impact on key sectors of the public. Content matters, but audience numbers also matter. If there is an imbalance in those two elements, that is an indication to funders and implementers that one side or the other of the equation needs attention. Depending on what’s out of balance, there might be a need for media literacy training of the journalists or the public. If citizens are not appreciating important news, then they need to be educated about the value or trustworthiness of such information. If journalists are not attracting an audience for solid reporting, then they need to consider how to better engage with their public. “If good journalism is to survive,” said Bettag of Stony Brook’s News Literacy Center, “it’s going to be because consumers are sophisticated enough to say they want it.”

Compared with ten years ago, substantially more attention is being paid to assessing the benefits of media development and media literacy by academic economists such as Oxford’s Collier. But while there is a lot in the world of development that is not quantifiable—or at least where numbers only tell part of the story—attention from other university or think-tank-based social scientists is still minimal.³⁰

More econometric as well as cross-disciplinary research could help shine

new light on problems and opportunities. Carefully designed research, especially research that spans subject boundaries, could bring not just attention but greater comprehension of a situation. Actually, “a huge amount of data is being generated about information and communication needs,” but that global research has not been collected in a way that is usable by others, said Deane of the BBC World Service Trust.

“There’s no clear intellectual leader within the development system,” noted Deane. “I think it’s difficult to point to any single institution in the world which is a leading research center on the role of media in governance development.” The lack of such a center limits how the various players can use the research that has already been conducted to determine the best ways forward.

There is insufficient funding for media literacy. Governments, international organizations, private foundations, and corporations are the funders of global media development. They put the greatest amount of money into the field, but their money can raise, as MDLF’s Vucinic delicately put it, “philosophical questions” for recipients. Money from such institutions can be perceived as tainted.

There are a handful of private foundations and corporations that make support for journalism a priority: Knight, McCormick, Ford, MacArthur, Carnegie, and a few other foundations. Foundation program officers and boards are often able to shift funding more nimbly than the unwieldy bureaucracies of governments and multilateral organizations, and as a result they may be able to quickly take advantage of breaking opportunities, or to respond

to crises, or even to consider innovative projects put forward by petitioners with minimal track records.

Corporations and individual philanthropists are a possible source of additional funding. Nokia, the cellphone corporation, for example, has come to see itself as invested not only in delivering technology, but in defending the value of a media-literate public. As Jan Chipchase, a human-behavior researcher for Nokia has argued, “If you wanted to take phones away from anybody in this world who has them, they’d probably say: ‘You’re going to have to fight me for it. Are you going to take my sewer and water away too?’ And maybe you can’t put communication on the same level as running water, but some people would. And I think in some contexts, it’s quite viable as a fundamental right.”³¹

But there is a challenge to get corporations, venture philanthropy organizations, personal foundations and high-net-worth

Many technology corporations want nothing to do with what they see as the political agenda of media development.

individuals interested in media literacy training. To some the connection is clear: Media literacy training is essential if a group wants its message to be understood. If the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has targeted health issues for example, wants to get vaccines into

mouths across Africa, the foundation should take an interest in supporting the communication chain that will transmit the idea that vaccines are good, and tell people where to get them.

Yet, many technology corporations, for example, want nothing to do with what they see as the political agenda of

media development, and many private organizations are not convinced that media literacy is an essential component of their own missions. There are not, as yet, sufficiently powerful constituencies making that case for media literacy—a situation that means that there are clear growth opportunities in identifying and educating individuals, small family foundations, and corporations.

Recommendations for Effective Approaches to Media Literacy

- **Create a funders' consortium.** Media literacy training is now marginally funded by agencies and foundations specializing in journalism. But many of those who have already committed to such projects believe that government agencies, private foundations, and international organizations invested not only in journalism, but in such fields as education and human rights should come together to find common cause in supporting media literacy. The case also should be made to new groups only tangentially involved in the sector—telecommunications and technology corporations and individual philanthropists, for example. The result would be to put together old and new players in an effort to be more strategic about where the dollars were going.
- **Require that coordination among funders, implementers, and in-country partners be written into project proposals.** Communication and coordination among funders is poor. Many media literacy projects are located in countries where there can be little public acknowledgement of the work, and discussion of the projects is on a need-to-know basis. Even in more open environments, lessons learned from projects based within a region are rarely discussed outside that geographic silo. Both challenges and best practices need to be shared; safe venues need to be created for that to happen; and money needs to be budgeted within grants for communication and coordination.
- **Track the delivery of media literacy programs in larger projects.** Media literacy programs are rarely funded by themselves; they are typically small components of larger projects. They therefore often fly under the radar of the granting agencies, so that officers outside the direct chain of authority have little understanding of their value, and few ways of tracking their effectiveness. Media literacy programs should be better tracked so their costs and outcomes can be evaluated.
- **Measure the level of media literacy in developing countries.** Many funders have found IREX's Media Sustainability Index (MSI) to be invaluable for evaluating national and regional media development needs. A sixth criterion should be added to the five that IREX now weighs: the level of media literacy among the citizens—how a country's population has access to, understands, and uses media.
- **Do more research on media literacy, and create an international center to connect it.** More multidisciplinary research to help identify problems and

opportunities in the field of media literacy needs to be conducted and made widely accessible. Both qualitative and quantitative research is needed—from historical studies of changes over time to polling of audience opinions. Among the questions to ask: Which news outlets do people trust or not trust? What value do they place on the media they read or watch or listen to?

- **Expand the pool of donors funding projects that include media literacy components.** The current crop of government agencies and foundations are not supplying enough funding to cover media literacy programs. Those interested in the field should enlist more philanthropists and corporations.

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Mark Whitehouse, Director of Media Development, IREX

Endnotes

¹ A number of national and international organizations have posited definitions for media literacy. One which the authors of this report find especially strong, and which is now subscribed to by a large consortium of international actors, is the definition inscribed in the European Charter for Media Literacy: <http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu/charter.php>.

“Point 2 of the European Charter notes:

1. We believe that media literate people should be able to:
2. Use media technologies effectively to access, store, retrieve and share content to meet their individual and community needs and interests;
3. Gain access to, and make informed choices about, a wide range of media forms and content from different cultural and institutional sources;
4. Understand how and why media content is produced;
5. Analyse critically the techniques, languages and conventions used by the media, and the messages they convey;
6. Use media creatively to express and communicate ideas, information and opinions;
7. Identify, and avoid or challenge, media content and services that may be unsolicited, offensive or harmful;
8. Make effective use of media in the exercise of their democratic rights and civic responsibilities.”

² Tom Bettag (State University of New York, Stony Brook’s News Literacy Center), in

interview with the author, February 1, 2009.

³ William Orme (former policy advisor for the United Nations Development Program), in interview with the author, January 26, 2009.

⁴ NB: the author is using the term “media literacy” rather than “news literacy” because internationally that is the term in common usage, even when the content of what is being discussed is primarily “news.” Second, we are using the term media literacy, because as the type of media platforms and services proliferate and as news becomes embedded in such non-news venues as Twitter messages and radio talk shows, media literacy has come to be for many a term that better comprehends these trends.

But it should be noted that many Americans do prefer the term “news literacy” or “information literacy.” We have found, however, that when they do so many are referencing a more limited set of literacies than we are here. As Carolyn Lukensmeyer, President of AmericaSpeaks, notes “I’ve held the phrase ‘media literacy’ ... narrowly—to basically just mean people’s ability to critique what they see across the various channels of media.” Alan Miller, former LA Times journalist and more recently founder of the News Literacy Project, references what his US-based project does “as news literacy, which we think of as a tributary of media literacy. We’re a little more narrowly focused in terms of news and information—how to know what to believe in the news and information environment... We have 4 pillars of our curriculum or focus. One

of which is why news matters to young people. The second is the role of the First Amendment and free media in a democracy—particularly the watchdog role. The third is how to know what to believe—how to sort fact from fiction in a digital age and the difference between verified and credible information from opinion, raw material, gossip and propaganda. And then finally the opportunities and challenges created by the Internet and the digital media.”

⁵ Alberto Ibarguen (president, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation), in interview with the author, March 13, 2009.

⁶ All quotes from Salzburg Global Seminar discussion. See Salzburg Global Seminar, “Paul Collier Speaks to Participants at the Salzburg Global Seminar’s Strengthening Independent Media Initiative,” October 5, 2008, <http://www.salzburgglobal.org/2009/sim.cfm?nav=news&IDMedia=2>.

⁷ David Hoffman (president and co-founder, Internews Network), in interview with the author, February 11, 2009.

⁸ For more on this, see Moeller’s posting on the CommGap, World Bank’s blog: Susan Moeller, “Media Literacy: An Avenue to Broader Citizen Participation and Good Governance,” *CommGap: People, Spaces, Deliberation*, December 17, 2008, <http://publicsphere.worldbank.org/media-literacy-avenue-broader-citizen-participation-good-governance>. See also United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization, “Press freedom and development: an analysis of correlations between freedom of the press and the different dimensions of development, poverty, governance and peace,” 2008,

http://portal.unesco.org/ci/en/ev.php-URL_ID=27649&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.

⁹ Algirdas Lipstas (deputy director, Network Media Program, Open Society Foundation), in interview with the author, February 2, 2009.

¹⁰ Bettina Peters (director, Global Forum for Media Development), in interview with the author, February 5, 2009.

¹¹ Eric Newton (vice president, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation), in interview with the author, January 23, 2009.

¹² Mark Whitehouse (director of media development, IREX), in interview with the author, February 9, 2009.

¹³ Sina Odugbemi (senior policy and strategy advisor, the World Bank), in interview with the author, January 14, 2009.

¹⁴ On the Kenyan experience, see Jamal Abdi and James Deane, “The Kenya 2007 elections and their aftermath: The role of media and communications,” *BBC World Service Trust*, April 2008, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya_policy_briefing_08.pdf.

¹⁵ Sasa Vucinic (managing director, the Media Development Loan Fund), in interview with the author, January 19, 2009.

¹⁶ James Deane (head of policy development, the BBC World Service Trust), in interview with the author, January 29, 2009.

¹⁷ Calvin Sims (program officer, the Ford Foundation), in interview with the author, March 12, 2009.

¹⁸ Mary Myers (independent media development consultant), in interview with the author, January 30, 2009.

¹⁹ Susan King (vice president for external affairs, the Carnegie Corporation of New York), in interview with the author, February 4, 2009.

²⁰ Well-Informed Journalists Make Well-Informed Citizens: Coverage of governance issues in the D R Congo. Mary Myers Paper for World Bank Conference: Paris, November 2007. Also referenced: Project Memorandum: Media for Democracy and Accountability 2007-2011, DFID.

²¹ Mark Koenig (senior media advisor, U.S. Agency for International Development), in interview with the author, January 14, 2009.

²² Persephone Miel (senior advisor, Internews), in interview with the author, February 2, 2009.

²³ Ofcom, “Annex B, Supporting document: - Section 11 Communications Act ,” December 29, 2003, http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/strategymedialit/ml_statement/annexb/?a=87101. See also EuroMediaLiteracy, “The European Charter for Media Literacy,” 2006, <http://www.euromedialiteracy.eu/charter.php>. See also Centre de Liaison de l’Enseignement et des Medias d’Information, “The CLEMI at a glance,” <http://www.clemi.org/fr/anglais/>.

²⁴ The impact of new media, and particularly citizen journalists, on media literacy is discussed in detail in the second report in this series *Media Literacy: Citizen Journalists*.

²⁵ Troy Etulain (senior civil society expert, U.S. Agency for International Development),

in interview with the author, January 14, 2009.

²⁶ American Society of Newspaper Editors, “Speech by Rupert Murdoch to the American Society of Newspaper Editors,” April 13, 2005, http://www.newscorp.com/news/news_247.html. In 2001, Marc Prensky brought the terms “Digital Native” and “Digital Immigrant” to the education community with his article “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”: Marc Prensky, “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants,” *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001), <http://www.twitchspeed.com/site/Prensky%20-%20Digital%20Natives,%20Digital%20Immigrants%20-%20Part1.htm>.

²⁷ Charles Firestone (executive director, Communications and Society Program, the Aspen Institute), in interview with the author, January 28, 2009.

²⁸ Carolyn Lukensmeyer (president, founder, AmericaSpeaks), in interview with the author, February 6, 2009.

²⁹ The International Research and Exchanges Board, “Media Sustainability Index,” <http://www.irex.org/MSI/index.asp>.

³⁰ The World Bank has recently supported social science research in the field and published a book collecting the research : Pippa Norris and Sina Odugbemi, eds., *The Role of the News Media in the Governance Agenda* (The World Bank Press, May 2009).

³¹ Sarah Corbett, “Can the Cellphone Help End Global Poverty?” *New York Times*, April 13, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/13/magazine/13anthropology-t.html>.

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