Good, But How Good?

Monitoring and Evaluation of Media Assistance Projects

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Andy Mosher

June 25, 2009

CIMA Center for International Media Assistance

NED National Endowment for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world

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.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director

Center for International Media Assistance
National Endowment for Democracy
1025 F Street, N.W., 8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

Phone: (202) 378-9700
Fax: (202) 378-9407
Email: CIMA@ned.org
URL: http://cima.ned.org

About the Author

Andy Mosher

Andy Mosher is a media consultant who has worked closely with the Center for International Media Assistance and with IREX. He spent 28 years in the newspaper business, most recently with *The Washington Post*, where between 1990 and 2008 he was deputy foreign editor, foreign copy chief, and national business editor. In 2000, Mosher trained journalists in Zambia as a Knight International Journalism Fellow. A native of California, he attended the University of San Francisco.

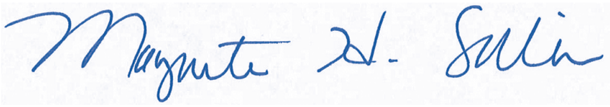
Table of Contents

Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) commissioned this study on monitoring and evaluation of media development programs. The purpose of the report is to examine this important methodology for measuring the effectiveness of media development programs and to trace the increasing use of monitoring and evaluation among practitioners in the media assistance community.

CIMA is grateful to Andy Mosher, a veteran journalist and media consultant, for his research and insights on this topic.

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



Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

During the early '90s, international media assistance was transformed from a small field to a multimillion-dollar global endeavor. While how to gauge the impact of this wave of assistance was always a concern, the so-called media missionaries' strong sense of purpose and their limited understanding of social science techniques often led them to give short shrift to monitoring and evaluating their media development programs. Since then, things have changed. Interviews with more than a dozen donors, media assistance implementers, and professional evaluators indicate that the importance of monitoring and evaluation has become more widely appreciated. Monitoring—the tracking of programs and activities as they proceed, and the marshaling of the resulting data—has become more rigorous over time. And evaluation—the assessment of a program's impact—has become an integral part of virtually every assistance program, according to those who design and implement them.

Practitioners say there is an increased emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, or M&E, because donors want to know that their money is being well spent, and implementers want to know when their programs succeed and when they fall short. Over time, parties have gained a better understanding of how M&E works—or doesn't work—and are better able to conduct monitoring and evaluation.

The process of adapting the practice of M&E to media assistance is an ongoing one, and it seems that no two organizations in this sector share precisely the same terminology or methods. Yet all seem to agree that the M&E process must begin long before the project itself with the formulation of a proper plan for conducting monitoring and evaluation. Whereas monitoring focuses on what is being done, evaluation looks at what difference a program has made. While there is a consensus that the true value of a project lies in its broad, long-term impact, there are divisions over how—or whether—even the most meticulous evaluation can establish cause-and-effect relationships between programs and societal change.

But interviews with M&E practitioners make clear that, while the nature of their work calls for constant adaptation and variation, they do in fact share a number of tools, techniques and approaches to the craft. These include marshaling of baseline data, use of content analysis, balancing quantitative and qualitative data, and employing outside evaluators.

Media assistance practitioners agree that M&E is expensive, but they say the actual cost is all but impossible to calculate. While some aspects, such as contracts with outside evaluators, are easily tracked, many in-house functions are just part of a day's work for one or more staffers and don't appear as discrete line items on a budget.

The growing emphasis on more and better M&E for media assistance projects shows every sign of intensifying in the coming years. The push will be both driven and enhanced by advances in technology, several interviewees said.

The success of some new initiatives, however, depends in large measure on the willingness of media assistance organizations to share information about M&E. The past 20 years offer little evidence of sharing among groups that have the same goals and methods but often compete for the same grants. Yet practitioners offer some hope that information that is not competitive or proprietary could be shared.

I. Why M & E?

"Where are we driving this truck?"

- Susan Philliber, partner, Philliber Research Associates

The dismantling of the Iron Curtain in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later ushered in what can be called the modern era of media assistance by American donors and implementers. What had been a relatively small field—limited largely to Latin America in the early 1980s—was swiftly transformed into a global endeavor. In barely two decades, hundreds of millions of dollars[1] have been spent to promote robust, independent media in developing and transitional societies in the belief that free media contribute to the building of democracy and economic development.[2]

During the early '90s, the widely held ideals that underpinned media assistance provided sufficient motivation for donors and implementers alike. The intrinsic value of free media, coupled with the eagerly awaited opportunity to bring it to the long-isolated Soviet Bloc countries, kept the volunteers coming, the implementers innovating, and the dollars flowing, according to veterans of the field. The question of what impact this wave of assistance was having on the journalists—and societies—of the targeted countries was always a concern, but the so-called media missionaries' strong sense of purpose and their limited understanding of the social science techniques often led them to give short shrift to the process known as monitoring and evaluation.

"Most of the evaluations which I looked at were not very good."

— Krishna Kumar, senior social scientist, U.S. Department of State

Krishna Kumar has been involved in the monitoring and evaluation of media assistance for more than two decades with the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development and now with the State Department, where he is senior social scientist. Kumar recalls having USAID staff gather progress reports form media assistance projects in the early '90s and finding that "often, the quality differed, but some kind of report was there."[3]

"So far as evaluations are concerned, most of the evaluations which I looked at were not very good," said Kumar, the author of several books on media assistance. "There were several reasons. One is that there is not a culture for evaluation in most of the projects, particularly in the media sector … in fact most of them don't even believe in quantitative indicators—'If you are doing good work, it is evident.'"

Others in the media assistance sector echo Kumar's assessment. As recently as 2005, Susan Abbott of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication wrote:

> "Despite the relentless rise in the significance of the media and communications sector in economic and cultural terms, the

> media development field lacks a clear evidence base that illustrates the impact and significance of its activities, training programs, and advocacy work … That media matter is not such a hard case to support, but exactly how it matters and what it actually does, in the context of development, whether by contributing to the health of the economy, polity, or society, has been the focus of considerable debate.'[4]

Yet things are changing, in ways that Kumar, Abbott and others not only acknowledge but foster through their work. Interviews with more than a dozen donors, implementers, and professional evaluators indicate that the importance of monitoring and evaluation has become more widely appreciated. Monitoring—the tracking of programs and activities as they proceed, and the marshalling of the resulting data—has become more rigorous over time. And evaluation—which some describe as the assessment of a program's impact—has become an integral part of virtually every assistance program, according to those who design and implement them.

"I can't really understand why we would do things unless you could in some way prove or demonstrate the impact of what it is you'll be doing."

— Nick Oatley, director of institutional learning, Search for Common Ground

"I can't really understand why we would do things unless you could in some way prove or demonstrate the impact of what it is you'll be doing," said Nick Oatley, director of institutional learning at Search for Common Ground, a conflict-resolution group that frequently undertakes media assistance programs around the world. "You can assume that work you're doing is contributing and making a difference, but really unless you know what that difference is and that some things work better than others and that you can then use that information to build into your future programming, it seems to me that a sort of huge chunk … is missing."[5]

Practitioners say there is an increased emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, or M&E, because donors want to know that their money is being well spent, and implementers want to know when their programs succeed and when they fall short. Over time, parties have gained a better understanding of how M&E works—or doesn't work—and are better able to conduct monitoring and evaluation.

USAID, the biggest American funder of media assistance projects, spent slightly more than $52 million on them in 2006.[6] Because those are public funds, "we need to be able to demonstrate to the U.S. taxpayers and to the Congress that this money is being well spent. And we try and find the best indicators of that," said David Black, strategic planning and research advisor at USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance.[7]

At the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the second-largest private funder of media assistance in the United States, Eric Newton, vice president of the journalism program, said the most obvious reason "to monitor and evaluate grantees is to be able to make better decisions in the future about giving out grants and to help the people who do this kind of work all over the world to understand what's been done by others."

Newton acknowledged that evaluation is "an imperfect science. It's difficult to do it well, but I don't think that absolves us from the responsibility to try."[8]

Implementers say that the donors' concerns are not only understood but shared. Patrick Butler, vice president for programs at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), acknowledges that "we understand where donors are coming from, why they want to know whether their money is being spent effectively."[9] ICFJ received roughly $500,000 from the Knight Foundation in 2008, not including money disbursed for long-term grants awarded in previous years.[10]

He added that "we want to know, too. We're constantly trying new techniques, and the only way to find out if they're working is to have some fairly reliable way of measuring the outcomes."

The most obvious reason "to monitor and evaluate grantees is to be able to make better decisions in the future about giving out grants."

— Eric Newton, vice president of the journalism program, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

As a result, donors and implementers alike are devoting more time and money to M&E (though no one interviewed for this report said it was possible to quantify the monetary outlay). Some implementers have entered into sustained working relationships with outside evaluation firms to conduct evaluations of key programs and to increase media assistance workers' understanding of M&E. Susan Philliber, whose Philliber Research Associates has been involved in M&E for media since 1998 and now works closely with ICFJ, said the growing emphasis on M&E represents "a sea change" from the limited efforts being undertaken in the '90s. "What's going on is a massive shift from a focus on activity to focus on outcomes," she said.[11]

That shift, Philliber said, is essential to the success of media assistance efforts. When implementers focus only on how their programs are conducted instead of on what impact they have, they are like someone who climbs into a truck and starts driving without regard for destination or route. Everyone involved in media assistance, said Philliber, ultimately must ask: "Where are we driving this truck?"

II. What is M & E?

At its most basic, the practice of monitoring and evaluation is as old as the ledger sheet. Any endeavor whose progress or regress is measurable in some way and benefits from close attention—which is to say almost any endeavor imaginable—is a potential subject for M&E. But the social science discipline of M&E began to take shape roughly 40 years ago. Since then, M&E has expanded rapidly, spawning theories and practices that are well documented but go far beyond the scope of this report.

The bulk of M&E methodology has been developed outside the realm of media assistance, often in sectors that lend themselves more readily to quantitative study. The process of adapting the practice of M&E to media assistance is an ongoing one, and it seems that no two organizations in this sector share precisely the same terminology or methods. Yet all seem to agree that the M&E process must begin long before the project itself, with the formulation of a proper M&E plan.

The heart of many M&E plans is the logical framework, or "logframe." This is a tool that charts the path of a project, from marshaling resources and identifying a problem (collectively called inputs); to developing activities aimed at addressing the problem (process); to documenting the results of those activities (output); to establishing what effect the activities have on participants (outcome); and finally to determining—when possible—the longer-term effects on the society in which the participants live (impact).[12] Not all M&E plans will contain logframes that contain exactly five steps or use the same terms. But some sort of progression from initial idea to eventual impact appears common to all M&E plans, and the logframe is the most widely used means of charting that progression.

Donors, implementers and evaluators all say that creating an M&E plan in the earliest stages of project planning is essential to the eventual success of monitoring efforts. In fact, the processes of planning a project and planning for its monitoring and evaluation ideally will be conducted concurrently.

"You have to think about that before you start," said Rebekah Usatin, program officer for monitoring and evaluation at the National Endowment for Democracy. "No matter what kind of project you're talking about, whether it's media or not, if monitoring and evaluation is not integrated into the project design, and if evaluative activities are not included and budgeted for in the project plan, you're not going to get very far."[13]

Once a project is begun, the M&E process shifts from planning to monitoring. And just as media assistance projects can take a dizzying number of forms, so can the means of monitoring them. "Within media development, each program looks different," said Marjorie Rouse, vice president for Europe, Eurasia and ICT policy at Internews, another of the three major U.S. implementers. "If you have a program that's focused on content production, you're going to be measuring the impact of that content. And if you have more of an advocacy program, you're going to be looking at a different set of indicators. If you're looking at media literacy issues you're going to have different indicators. So we don't have a cookie cutter that we can apply to any single program."[14]

Variations notwithstanding, implementers and outside evaluators interviewed for this report were unanimous in their assertion that careful monitoring during a program is essential to M&E. Steps must be taken to ensure that data is reported early and at regular intervals, according to Mark Whitehouse, director of media development programs at International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), one of the big three American implementers in the field of media assistance. "If, halfway through a project, you get your first results and, oh my God—that's not a good time to get that."[15]

Even the best monitoring is useless if it sits on a shelf, practitioners agree. Ideally, data mined through monitoring will be shared with in-country partners, with headquarters back in the United States, and with donors on a regular—and timely—basis. At Search for Common Ground, a relatively small implementer, "the information we collect is available to people involved in projects in real time, for them to reflect on and to change and modify the work that they do," Oatley said.[16]

USAID requires implementers to pass along quarterly monitoring reports, according to Meg Gaydosik, the agency's senior media development advisor. "Implementers are required to tell us what they've been doing, and then I match up the results with what they said they were expecting to have happen in the time period. And if there's a problem, they explain it. And if there's no problem, great," said Gaydosik.[17] In addition, USAID grantees must submit a broader monitoring report on an annual basis.

"Ultimately, we hope we're having some impact on society … So how do you measure that?"

— Patrick Butler vice president for programs, International Center for Journalists

After a project has concluded, evaluation begins.[18] Whereas monitoring focuses on what is being done, evaluation looks at what difference a program has made in the lives of participants, a city, even a country. And that, practitioners agree, is both fundamentally important and maddeningly difficult. While there is a consensus that the true value of a project lies in its broad, long-term impact, there are divisions over how—or whether—even the most meticulous evaluation can establish cause-and-effect relationships between programs and societal change.

"The whole attribution issue is a very vexed one in evaluations," said Search for Common Ground's Oatley. "But having said that, what we do try and do is construct methodologies and use tools that as far as possible try to measure the direct effects of the work that we do."

Many M&E practitioners find it more practical to establish a hierarchy of impacts. ICFJ's Butler said his organization looks first at whether a program resulted in the establishment of something concrete and measureable, such as a journalism center, a new institution such as a journalists' organization, or a self-sustaining digital platform for media. "Those are the sort of

The View from Above

Along with the practically innumerable evaluations generated by individual projects, a handful of broader studies aim to present a high-altitude look at media assistance and the context in which it is conducted. These surveys assess countries and regions on the basis of press freedom, business conditions, institutional infrastructure, and other broad indicators in an effort to describe their so-called media landscape. Most notable are Freedom House's Freedom of the Press index (http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16), IREX's Media Sustainability Index (http://www.irex.org/MSI/index.asp) and Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index (http://www.rsf.org/-Anglais-.html). In addition, State Department country reports include brief characterizations of conditions for media, and the U.N. Development program recently developed a set of indicators for assessing media landscapes.

These big-picture analyses are quite different from ground-level evaluations of individual projects, yet the two can complement one another. For example, a media assistance group planning a project in a particular country will often consult the MSI, Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders indices to gauge conditions facing the media in that country. "I do think that as a methodology, it can be a useful starting point for monitoring and evaluation, and you could use the scores as one sort of piece of your monitoring and evaluation tool kit," said Leon Morse, managing editor of the MSI.

Morse cautioned, however, "I think that monitoring and evaluation plans for individual projects need to be much more focused on the sort of immediate goals and objectives of that project, and I think that the Media Sustainability Index just doesn't focus on that. And we never intended to. We designed it as an assessment tool and as a way to compare countries and to look at their progress or regression over time."

While the indices' value in getting a project off on the right foot seems clear, using them at the end of a project to show its purported high-level impact on a country or society is unwise. Yet evaluators occasionally cite Freedom House or MSI findings as evidence that a particular project fulfilled its most ambitious objectives. Perhaps the most widely cited example emerged in 2005, when a Government Accountability Office report (http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d05803.pdf) found that evaluations of State Department and USAID media assistance projects "often selected media indexes, such as the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) and Freedom House's Press Freedom survey, to measure the results of their independent media development efforts. The MSI and the Press Freedom survey assess the freedom of media in a country; however, when used alone as performance indicators, media indexes are of limited utility in measuring the specific contributions of specific activities or combined U.S. efforts toward developing independent media in particular countries."

Karin Deutsch Karlekar, managing editor of Freedom House's press index, said using the index in that manner is "fairly problematic. The overall score for a country could go up and down for different reasons … I would be hesitant about people looking at overall scores and drawing conclusions from that."

Said Morse: "I just don't think it's possible to show any change in numbers is attributable to any one project ... because there are just so many other factors going on."

concrete things that you can definitely show; 'We did that.'" The second level would be what Butler called journalistic changes: increases in skills among individual journalists, evidence of structural change at media outlets, or changes that benefit journalists as a whole. Last come changes to society.

"Ultimately, we hope we're having some impact on society … So how do you measure that?" Butler asked. "That's the hardest one."[19]

Others say they, too, see a need to recognize different levels of impact, and some suggest that when assessing impact on a case-by-case basis, it is perhaps unrealistic to look too broadly.

"For an M&E plan, I don't think we should waste our time figuring out … that big-picture connection between developing the media and various forms of societal change," said IREX's Whitehouse. "… these societal changes are usually won not during the course of a project. If you have a three-year project, what can you really do?"

Usatin, of NED, agrees: "What difference are we making? That's something we can't always answer at the end of one discrete grant."

"With what we're doing on a grant-by-grant level, it's not that we're not having impact, but impact is so much bigger than that. We're building toward impact," said Usatin, whose organization makes relatively small grants to in-country grantees for one-year projects. If journalists in a particular country are no longer being harassed, "what does that mean?" she asked. "It's probably much bigger than something one $25,000 grant can do."[20]

None of the practitioners interviewed, however, suggested that the difficulty inherent in evaluating impact meant that they should be content to track activities and amass raw data. On the contrary, there was a clear consensus that if they can show that they are conducting their projects flawlessly but cannot show that they are making a difference in people's lives, they are failing their funders and the people they are trying to serve.

"I think there is a distinction between knowing whether or not you're managing to implement your project well and knowing whether or not the things that you're implementing are actually having their intended effect," said Devra C. Moehler, a democracy fellow with USAID's Office of Democracy and Governance. "I think we're much better at doing the former and not trying hard enough to do the latter. And I think there's an increase in the attention now to wanting to do the latter better, and we're still trying to figure out how best to do that. Because it's the latter that really tells you how to program in the future."[21]

III. What Works, and What Doesn't?

As evaluators in health, education, agriculture and other fields have developed common methodologies and lexicons over the years, the still-evolving media assistance sector sometimes seems headed in the other direction. As already mentioned, the many and varied needs that practitioners seek to address tend to produce solutions that are almost as varied. As a result, M&E plans, data sets and evaluations also differ from project to project, yielding a body of work that is heterogeneous in the extreme. "There's not as much agreed upon instrumentation … as there needs to be," said Philliber of Philliber Research Associates.[22]

This sometimes dizzying array of approaches to M&E can be glimpsed on the Internet. Several media assistance groups and donors post at least some of their program evaluations on-line, ranging from USAID, whose Development Experiences Clearinghouse (http://dec.usaid.gov) contains media-specific reports interspersed among nearly 65,000 documents related to development programs, to Search from Common Ground, where an Institutional Learning Team maintains an on-line database (http://www.sfcg.org/sfcg/sfcg_evaluations.html) that contains evaluations of that group's more modest range of programs around the world. Even a limited review of such documents reveals a wide range of approaches to media assistance, chronicled in an almost equally wide variety of forms: in-house monitoring, outside evaluations, spreadsheets full of numbers, narratives full of anecdotes.

Combing through such documents in search of common threads can—for the uninitiated, at least—prove frustrating, even fruitless. But interviews with M&E practitioners make clear that, while the nature of their work calls for constant adaptation and variation, they do in fact share a number of tools, techniques and approaches to the craft. Among them:

"You really can't measure impact without baseline research."

— Maureen Taylor, professor, University of Oklahoma and senior associate, Social Impact

Baseline data— Media assistance practitioners are virtually unanimous in agreeing that it is impossible to show that a program has fostered change if no information has been gathered to establish what went before it. "You really can't measure impact without baseline research," said Maureen Taylor, a professor at the University of Oklahoma and a senior associate with Social Impact, an evaluation firm that often works with IREX.[23]

Baseline data can be any kind of information that describes the context in which a project will be implemented. More to the point, it should characterize the situation that the project is meant to address. For example, if a project is aimed at expanding the role of women in media, implementers won't be able to document their project's success or failure if they do not know such basic information as how many female journalists there were at the outset of the program, what proportion of articles were written by women, or how many women held management positions at media outlets.

It essential to have baseline data in hand before a project is begun. "Usually, once the event happens, you can't go back," said Luis Botello, the senior program manager who oversees M&E at ICFJ. "Once you start a project, you can't do a baseline evaluation."[24]

As essential as baseline data is now considered to be, it was often conspicuous in its absence just a few years ago. "Having that integrated right from the get-go is just now becoming standard practice," USAID's Gaydosik said.[25]

Logframes—This is a tool that many evaluators find invaluable as a means to ensure that a project's various steps follow a logical path from start to finish.

"A logframe, for a program manager, can be an extraordinarily useful and valuable tool—if you know how to use it. If you don't know how to use it, and you're a nascent group … wow! Scary, difficult, waste of time, not useful."

— Rebekah Usatin, program officer for monitoring and evaluation, National Endowment for Democracy

The logframe is the essence of an M&E plan, while the bulk of the plan spells out specifics about activities, timing and so forth. Some donors consider it a key factor in deciding whether a proposed media assistance program is worthy of a grant. For example, USAID requires that all submissions for grants have detailed M&E plans, but the agency only requires that the logframe be included in the bid for a grant. Only after a grant is awarded is the grantee required to submit a full M&E plan.[26]
The logframe, also known as a logic model, is not only important to donors. Botello said it also helps his organization's program staff—as well as participants in the Knight International Journalism Fellowship, which ICFJ administers—"to focus their project. It tells you the activities …to undertake, the short-term outcomes that that activity is going to offer, and the long-term impact of the project."[27]

The complexities involved in creating a logframe can be considerable, however. "A logframe, for a program manager, can be an extraordinarily useful and valuable tool—if you know how to use it. If you don't know how to use it, and you're a nascent group … wow! Scary, difficult, waste of time, not useful," said NED's Usatin.[28]

Alan Davis, director of special projects at the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, writes that while the difficulties inherent in creating and using logframes can be an impediment to their use, the benefits of logframes outweigh their drawbacks: "The level of discipline required usually results in us regarding them as inconveniences rather than the critical planning mechanisms they really are. And yet, if we are really serious about assessment, we need to rehabilitate the logframe and acknowledge it is as much an integral part of our toolkit as a spirit level is to a builder."[29]

Tracking activities and participants—
Just as training journalists remains the

predominant activity in media assistance programs, so documenting those activities and the participants—their attitudes, their skills, the career paths, or just simply their number—is a mainstay of M&E. It serves a purpose, practitioners say, but a limited one.

"There still is too much reliance on number of people trained," said IREX's Whitehouse. "To me that's not valuable … [it] tells you nothing about, did they learn anything, did it make a change in their reporting?"[30]

ICFJ's Butler recalls that when he first became involved with media assistance in 2000, "evaluation of a program was handing out a survey to the participants, and they'd tell you whether they liked it or not … [that's] just not really comprehensive enough, doesn't really tell you very much."[31]

Evaluators agree. "Tracking activity is important but holding six workshops is a process, NOT an outcome," Philliber wrote recently.[32]

Focus groups—A technique long used in market research, soliciting responses from a select group of people about a particular subject can be useful in gauging the impact of a media assistance project.

Internews' Rouse said the use of focus groups was a pivotal element in the evaluation of efforts by local Internews organizations in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to promote tolerance and dialogue by increasing the information available to the people of each country about the lives of those in neighboring countries.[33] The project's centerpiece is "Kids' Crossroads," a television show created by and for teenagers that had separate staffs and programming in each of the three countries but shared content among them. By tracking focus groups in each country from 2003 through 2007, Internews was able to show that teens who watched the show grew more tolerant toward neighboring countries than teens who did not watch the show.

"For 'Kids' Crossroads,' pre and post focus groups and looking at attitudinal change for that type of program works," Rouse said. In dealing with funders, she said, when Internews describes a project in terms of the activities it conducted or the relationships it created, "the immediate questions are: 'Right, but why did it matter? What impact did it have?' And so, on the rare occasion, like what we did with this program, we were able to say, 'well, we did these focus groups and were able to show clear attitudinal shifts in groups of youths who watched the program for a long period of time.' I mean, we get a lot of mileage out of that."[34]

Search for Common Ground has also developed a focus group methodology, which it hopes to employ soon in Nigeria, according to Search's Oatley.[35]

Content analysis—Tracking the effect that a media assistance project is having on what media outlets publish or broadcast is a technique employed by implementers and evaluators throughout the sector. "Content analysis is a really good way of showing qualitative improvement," said Taylor of the University of Oklahoma and Social Impact.[36]

Content analysis typically involves monitoring a newspaper's articles, a broadcaster's programs or a digital platform's content and assessing its accuracy, variety, readability or other attributes. Such judgments are made according to objective criteria that are established before the project begins and do not vary during the course of the project.

As part of an IREX project aimed at improving the quality of television stations in Kosovo, IREX and Social Impact worked together to create a content analysis process that would gauge "the quality of the stories," said IREX's Whitehouse. "Did they adhere to basic journalistic principles? Were both sides given the opportunity [to comment]? And also at the more macro level, what were they covering?" The latter aspect was important, Whitehouse explains, because if the stations produced better stories "but they're all about politics, and they never discuss education or environment or anything," one of the project's intended effects would not have been achieved.

Whitehouse said it is important that the subject not know when the content analysis is being conducted but that it is equally important that the results be shared once the exercise is completed. In Kosovo, he said, "they didn't like it necessarily, but they could see that, okay, this is what some neutral observer with this agreed methodology is saying about your project."[37]

Sharing data with stakeholders— As IREX demonstrated in Kosovo, the fruits of M&E are useful not only to donors and implementers but also to the people and organizations that their projects are designed to serve. "This helps makes M&E not just an afterthought," Whitehouse said. "We aren't just reporting this to USAID to say we did a good job. It actually is serving the client."[38]

Internews' Rouse concurs that it is "to everybody's benefit to look at monitoring and evaluation as serving multiple purposes. If you're gathering audience research data, don't have it sit on the shelf … That type of research is a wealth of information for a media outlet."[39]

Balancing quantitative and qualitative information—While the notion of where to strike this balance varies among projects and practitioners, all of those interviewed for this report saw value in including both statistical data and narrative prose in evaluations.

"Qualitative and quantitative data are like a screwdriver and a hammer. They're both tools, but they do different things," Philliber said.

Hard, qualitative data, such as the number of journalists trained in a given project or the number of stories run by a particular newspaper on a particular topic, can often be conveyed in statistical form, which donors and others frequently find compelling. ICFJ's Botello, while arguing that both qualitative and quantitative data are essential to M&E, said "what resonates with the funders and with people is that number—when I say 70 percent of participants gained knowledge from this program, rather than [saying] one journalist went back and implemented an emergency plan for the newsroom."[40]

Rouse, of Internews, agrees that funders want quantitative data and frequently build requirements for it into their grants, as in the case of USAID. "The basic requirements are often more quantitative," she said, "and we find that in addition to the quantitative, we need the qualitative to help us do good programs."

But, she notes, funders "also find that they get tremendous mileage out of the anecdotal data. Even though it might not fit into the [grant] framework, that's what is going to go into success stories that they put out."[41]

A compelling narrative, one that brings a project's participants to life rather than rendering them in numerical form, is inherently more effective for drawing a complete picture of what a program has achieved, contends Search for Common Ground's Oatley.[42]

Kumar, of the State Department, said it was only natural that evaluations of projects involving media would lend themselves to storytelling: "My view is that … apart from using all these quantitative data and all that, it would be very helpful to use the techniques of investigative journalism. You go, you talk to them, you gauge their opinion. And I think that would help, then, to highlight both the success and the limitations of the media project."[43]

Keeping things measurable—
Evaluators stress that balancing quantitative and qualitative data is not the same as choosing between that which can be measured and that which cannot. On the contrary, all the benchmarks built into an M&E plan, from the basic list of participants to the more complex assessments of a project's impact, must be measurable.

ICFJ, for example, has worked with Philliber Research Associates to devise ways "to decide what kinds of projects are possible, doable, in the sense that the impact is going to be measurable," said ICFJ's Botello. "So now there are certain questions that we ask ourselves first when the program staff meets, and we look at the impact, whether or not it's measurable, then we have to decide how is that going to be monitored and evaluated."[44]

ICFJ's Butler, said working with Philliber's firm has "made us a little more realistic about our expectations for what we're going to achieve. I think before this, we tended to put things in proposals that, as you go back and look at them from an M&E standpoint, you say, how were we ever going to show that we achieved that?"[45]

Hiring outside evaluators—
Almost paradoxically, media assistance practitioners' gradual embrace of the importance of M&E has spurred both a trend toward greater in-house expertise and an increased reliance on outside evaluators. This is easily explained: Implementers can handle the relatively simple tasks of reporting, compiling and—to some extent—analyzing data while a project is being conducted. But whenever possible, the more complex and demanding job of assessing the overall impact of a project is better left to professional evaluators, say implementers and evaluators alike.

"For most large, externally funded contracts, we would be looking to do evaluations that would be done by external contractors," explains Search for Common Ground's Oatley. "For ongoing monitoring, we have the capacity and resources within our program offices to do that, but certainly for an end-of-project evaluation, the majority of those would be done by external people."[46]

Philliber calls that sort of division of labor "a good model … It's too expensive if you want out-of-house evaluators to do all your data collection for you." If implementers learn to do that for themselves, in the

Nothing Succeeds Like Success

Can a multimillion-dollar industry undertake hundreds of projects aimed at tackling the intricate and seemingly endless problems facing media around the world for two decades without experiencing a single flat-out failure?

Apparently so – at least in the case of the United States' biggest media assistance organizations. In interviews, representatives of the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Internews, and Search for Common Ground all acknowledge that while specific aspects of some projects had not worked out, they could not recall a project that had been evaluated as a failure.

"I can think of ones where an aspect of the program didn't work, but never the whole," said Patrick Butler, ICFJ's vice president for programs. In some cases, Butler said, where something didn't work, "it was because of a coup – nothing we can do about that – or something that was out of our control. In other cases, it was something that, okay, next time we know that this was unrealistic and we shouldn't have said we were going to be able to do this."

"You have to set benchmarks. And we don't always achieve those, and sometimes things go backwards," said IREX's director of media development programs, Mark Whitehouse. "And so I would say projects usually don't fail … but activities within projects do. I think everyone will admit to that."

Butler, Whitehouse and others suggested that the incremental failures – when detected through proper monitoring – can often be the very things that prevent failure on a larger scale.

"The best evaluation will also be highlighting not only the successes but also the areas where you can improve," said Nick Oatley, director of institutional learning at Search for Common Ground. "I think you'd be a little bit skeptical if you saw evaluations that would be wholly glowing and had no recommendations for improvements or change."

Donors would certainly be skeptical, according to those interviewed, who unanimously stressed the need to be brutally open with the people who are paying for the projects.
"You have to be honest about it," Butler said "It's not always going to come back 100 percent rosy, especially if it's an independent evaluation. Most of what we've done has been very, very satisfying and gratifying … but reporting back to the funder, you have to give them everything."

"It might be that X didn't work, but Y did," explained Marjorie Rouse, vice president for Europe, Eurasia and ICT policy at Internews. In such cases, "you go back to the donor and it's a conversation, and if you've done your monitoring, you can tell them why this doesn't work and it can not work for a variety of reasons."

Such exchanges, said Mark Goldenbaum, Internews's program officer for the South Caucasus and Central Asia, lie at the heart of what makes a good partnership. "The formal process of back and forth – that's the essence of the donor-partner relationship, talking about what's working and what's not, Goldenbaum said. " Clearly the more we talk about troubles as well as our successes, the more likely they are to look at us as credible partners and to be engaged in that process."

One donor suggested that in the larger scheme of things a few failures might not be such a bad thing. "If nobody is failing, it might mean you're not taking enough risks … not ambitious enough," said Eric Newton, vice president of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation journalism program.

process they can "learn to understand how to define outcomes, to get clear on what you're doing. That's the most important thing."[47]

Philliber Research Associates works with ICFJ not just to evaluate major projects but also to enhance the center's capacity to monitor its programs. As a result, Botello said, ICFJ last year created an internal M&E unit to monitor programs and share data within the organization.

Employing outside evaluators tends to boost credibility. Donors and implementers who rely entirely on their own evaluations—no matter how meticulous and above-board their methods might be—risk being accused of succumbing to self-interest. On the other hand, when an outside evaluator works closely with a specific donor or implementer, questions of propriety may also be raised. The Knight Foundation's Eric Newton said that some evaluators have taken an approach that is consistently favorable to the sector as a whole—a phenomenon that he calls the "booster concept"—"to the point where there seems to be a veil over the parts of the project that we're not doing well. And really, that's bad social science."[48]

But while all parties say they regard credibility as extremely important, the question of money appears to weigh most heavily in determining whether outside evaluators enter the picture at all. ICFJ, IREX and Internews, like Search for Common Ground, all contract with outside firms to evaluate major projects with big budgets. But when the budgets are smaller, the choice gets harder. "Smaller programs probably just don't have the budget to do it," Butler said. Money spent on outside evaluators, he explained, is money not spent on program activities, and a project proposal that is short on activities is less attractive to donors.[49]

Said USAID's Gaydosik: "If you're looking at a media assistance budget of X, and it's going to cost Y just to do the evaluation, that's clearly going to take away from what you can put into the program. So it's a balancing act."[50]

IV. What Does It Cost?

When asked how much they spend on M&E, media assistance practitioners respond in a way that would make Mark Twain grin: Everyone said it costs a lot, but no one could say how much.

Interviewees said the uncertainty was a simple function of bookkeeping. Some aspects of M&E, such as contracts with outside evaluators, are easily tracked. But many in-house functions, particularly at the planning stages of a projects, are just part of a day's work for one or more staffers and don't appear as discrete line items on a budget.

"I think a lot of times we don't know the number. If we're doing it ourselves and using our own staff … then we aren't tracking sort of what we spend. Obviously if we're subcontracting to someone we have a better idea," Whitehouse, of IREX, said.[51]

ICFJ's Butler said that the cost of M&E that is done in planning stage of a project, before a donor chooses who will get the grant, is not only impossible to track, it's not directly compensated for if ICFJ wins the grant—and it's simply swallowed by the organization if the grant goes to someone else. "You can't get it back. Nobody pays your development costs," he said.[52]

In many sectors, the proper level of expenditure on M&E is expressed as a percentage of total project cost. There appears, however, to be no agreement within the media assistance community about what that percentage should be—or about whether it is practical to think in such terms.

The BBC World Service Trust, which not only conducts media assistance projects around the world but also boasts what many consider to be the gold standard for in-house M&E shops, "tends to put 12 percent of a project's cost toward monitoring," according to Gerry Power, the trust's director of research and knowledge management.[53] Search for Common Ground's Oatley said his organization's rule of thumb is that 5 to 7 percent of the budget be devoted to M&E.[54] But Internews' Rouse said: "When you look at a media development budget, you can't put 5 percent of your resources into M&E. It needs to go into activities."[55]

Whitehouse, in a panel discussion on M&E at the Global Forum for Media Development summit last year in Athens, conceded that most media assistance groups will never have the funds to do what the BBC World Service Trust does. But he said that media assistance practitioners can invoke the importance of M&E when pressing donors.[56] Rouse, too, said that "where you have greater demands, you can often get greater resources in the budget and you're able to do more."

V. What Does the Future Hold?

The growing emphasis on more and better M&E for media assistance projects shows every sign of intensifying in the coming years. USAID, for example, "is now reorganizing its evaluation office—it was closed two years ago—the central evaluation unit. And now, we are told … they have renewed the focus on accountability," said the State Department's Kumar. "So I have a feeling that there will be more focus on evaluation and monitoring … partly because people want to know, if we are spending so much money, what did we get out of it?"[57]

The push will be both driven and enhanced by advances in technology, several interviewees said. Newton of the Knight Foundation was particularly emphatic in asserting that "the digital age is providing powerful new tools" that will enable media assistance groups—donors and implementers alike—to amass and share data faster than ever before. The Internet, he said, provides a platform on which groups can post their findings "in front of everybody, in real time."

Newton said that the Knight Foundation is talking about implementing a form of open evaluation this year, starting with the foundation's network of Knight Chairs at two dozen universities around the United States. The pilot program would include online questionnaires for program participants, in effect putting unfiltered responses on the Web, he said. If successful, similar forms of open evaluation could be used for media assistance programs "anywhere in the world with good Web access, it seems to me."

"Funders could have access to a great deal of information immediately … instead of having to wait a year for program directors," Newton said.[58]

Search for Common Ground also is taking steps to use the Internet to make reporting and dissemination of research easier and faster. Oatley said Search has developed what he called a monitoring tracker—a spreadsheet that would be accessible via the Internet to staffers running the organization's programs in various countries. They could enter monitoring data, Oatley said, "so that we here in headquarters get a feel for the kind of work we're doing and so that we can hopefully aggregate that information for our own use, whether it's for fundraising, or whether it's for events that we might be going to, or just for our own reports that we're writing here."[59]

One of the most ambitious attempts to marry the benefits of the Internet to the needs of media assistance evaluators is a project being undertaken by the Catholic Media Council, or Cameco, based in Germany. Cameco is developing a wiki—an online, open-platform repository of information—to which media assistance practitioners from around the world can contribute M&E plans, evaluations, best practices and other related material, according to the wiki's developer, Sofie Jannusch of Cameco.[60] As of mid-June 2009, the wiki, called mediaME (http://www.mediame-wiki.net), was not yet in operation.

Another undertaking that appears to hold enormous potential is an initiative by the Global Forum for Media Development to "bring together interested media development organisations, key media researchers and existing initiatives to prepare a handbook or toolkit on monitoring and evaluation of media development programmes," according to GFMD's director, Bettina Peters. Peters said the initiative would have two aspects: to amass data about the media landscapes in individual countries, which could result in a wealth of information for media groups trying to establish baseline data for projects, and to compile indicators, data sources and tools for measuring impact.[61]

The success of initiatives by Cameco, GFMD, Knight and other groups depends in large measure on the willingness of media assistance organizations to share information about M&E. The past 20 years offer little evidence of sharing among groups that have the same goals and methods yet often compete for the same grants, but practitioners hold out some hope that information that is not competitive or proprietary could be shared.

"I don't see any sharing among evaluators … but donors are out ahead," said Philliber. Some donors, she said are "positively militant."

"I think it's sort of case by case," said IREX's Whitehouse, who is involved in GFMD's toolkit initiative. "We haven't shared a lot because no one's ever asked for it."

The difference between what can be shared and what can't, Whitehouse said, is largely a matter of tradecraft: "When you're in the middle of a project, I don't think people necessarily want to share that … What's competitive is the way you integrate M&E into your project. To me that's the competitive part. Doing content analysis is not, because tens of thousands of people around the world do content analysis."[62]

Rouse said that Internews has shared a lot of its findings, but that does not extend to proprietary information. "The proposal development process is always proprietary, by nature. It's competitive," she said.[63] ICFJ's Butler suggested that "there are definitely best practices that can be shared."[64]

"Personally I'm very happy to share, and this organization has an open-source kind of philosophy," said Oatley of Search for Common Ground. "If we work collaboratively, I think we could learn a lot more, a lot more quickly, about what's effective and what works."[65]

All agreed that GFMD appears to offer the best platform for M&E cooperation. "I think GFMD is certainly a logical place, because it's an open forum … and it seems to have a pretty broad participation level globally, not just U.S. and European organizations," said Rouse. "I don't know of another, similar organization with that type of mandate."[66]

VI. Recommendations

Fund M&E more aggressively, and establish equally aggressive requirements—Donors could benefit from putting more money into grants or contracts for M&E and conditioning it on grantees' or implementers' meeting scrupulous M&E requirements.

Develop a shared—but adaptable—approach to M&E methods—
Trying to make the M&E plan for every media assistance project fit a single template would probably do more harm than good. Program planners and evaluators would be discouraged from innovating, and the needs of the recipients of such assistance could be compromised. Yet media assistance groups could go a long way toward something approaching standardization without reaching the point where it becomes self-defeating. Simply agreeing on terminology and some shared metrics—still leaving room for adaptation on a program-by-program basis—would be a step in the right direction.

Ideally, these steps could be taken at the donor level. If donors agreed on certain definitions and standards and wrote them into the M&E requirements of grants or contracts, implementers could simply follow along. As a practical matter, however, such cooperation has always proved elusive among both donors and implementers.

Share non-competitive information—
Implementers and donors could share a great deal more information than they do now without giving away their competitive edge. Sharing country- and region-specific baseline data could serve as a rising tide that lifts all boats. In fact, such a practice might save organizations a considerable amount of money if, for example, sharing data from a single country or projects with several competitors resulted in a quid pro quo from each.

A good first step toward such cooperation is GFMD's M&E toolkit initiative. The scope of the organization and the expertise that it can bring to bear through its membership are considerable, and the initiative's goals are both worthwhile and achievable. All that is missing is money, which media assistance groups should provide.

Adapt bookkeeping practices to better reflect M&E outlay—If media assistance groups have embraced the notion that pursuing programs is pointless without evaluating them, they should likewise understand that undertaking M&E is foolish without knowing its true cost. While money paid to outside evaluators can be easily calculated, steps should be taken to at least estimate the heretofore uncalculated costs of in-house M&E. Only when that is done can organizations determine what proportion of a project's budget is being spent on M&E, and they should seriously consider setting a target proportion and sticking to it.

Endnotes

[1] Estimates vary. The figure of $600 million since 1989 cited in Ellen Hume's *Media Missionaries* (Miami: John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2004) was subsequently judged to be high by the Center for International Media Assistance. But figures in the hundreds of millions of dollars appear consistent with the bulk of estimates.

[2] Krishna Kumar, *Promoting Independent Media: Strategies for Democracy Assistance* (Boulder, CO, and London: Lynne Rienner, 2006), 1

[3] Krishna Kumar (senior social scientist, U.S. State Department), in interview with the author, April 20, 2009.

[4] Susan Abbott, "Media Development: The Case for Research," in *Media Matters: Perspectives on Advancing Governance & Development from the Global Forum for Media Development*, ed..Mark Harvey (Internews Europe, 2006), 187.

[5] Nick Oatley (director, Institutional Learning, Search for Common Ground), in interview with the author, March 26, 2009.

[6] Andrew T. Green (DG Metrics), in presentation on U.S. government funding of media development at the Center for International Media Assistance, June 12, 2009.

[7] David Black (strategic planning and research advisor, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Democracy and Governance, U.S. Agency for International Development), in interview with the author, April 3, 2009.

[8] Eric Newton (vice president, Journalism Program, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation), in telephone interview with the author, April 13, 2009.

[9] Patrick Butler (vice president for programs, International Center for Journalists), in interview with the author, March 20, 2009.

[10] Knight Foundation, *Grant Results*, http://www.knightfoundation.org/grants/grant_results.dot?kw=&program_area=Journalism&community=&year=2008&amount=.

[11] Susan Philliber (partner, Philliber Research Associates), in telephone interview with the author, May 13, 2009.

[12] Nina Fraskel and Anastasia Gage, *M&E Fundamentals: a Self-Guided Minicourse* (U.S. Agency for International Development and Measure Evaluation, 2007), 26-27.

[13] Rebekah Usatin (program officer for program monitoring and evaluation, National Endowment for Democracy), in interview with the author, June 4, 2009.

[14] Marjorie Rouse (vice president for Europe, Eurasia and ICT policy, Internews), in interview with the author, April 2, 2009.

[15] Mark Whitehouse (director of media programs at IREX), in interview with the author, March 17, 2009.

[16] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[17] Meg Gaydosik (senior media development advisor, U.S. Agency for International Development), in interview with the author,

April 3, 2009.

[18] Different methodologies differ on this point. Some regard evaluation as the entire process, with monitoring being a subset.

[19] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[20] Usatin, interview, June 4, 2009.

[21] Devra C. Moehler (democracy fellow, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, Office of Democracy and Governance, U.S. Agency for International Development), in interview with the author, April 3, 2009.

[22] Philliber, telephone interview, May 13, 2009

[23] Maureen Taylor (Gaylord Family chair of strategic communication, Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Oklahoma), in telephone interview with the author, April 8, 2009.

[24] Luis Botello (senior program director for digital media, International Center for Journalists), in interview with the author, March 20, 2009.

[25] Gaydosik, interview, April 3, 2009.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Botello, interview, March 20, 2009.

[28] Usatin, interview, June 4, 2009.

[29] Alan Davis, "A Road Map for Monitoring & Evaluation in the Media Development Sector," in *Media Matters*, ed. Mark Harvey, 89.

[30] Whitehouse, interview, March 17, 2009.

[31] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[32] Global Forum for Media Development, "Eye on Results: Susan Philliber on Outcome, not Output," http://gfmd.info/index.php/news/eye_on_results.

[33] Internews Network, *Kids' Crossroads: A Pan-Caucasus Media Project Building Cross-Cultural Ties Among Youth* (Internews Network 2007), 1.

[34] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

[35] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[36] Taylor, telephone interview, April 8, 2009.

[37] Whitehouse, interview, March 17, 2009.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

[40] Botello, interview, March 20, 2009.

[41] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

[42] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[43] Kumar, interview, April 20, 2009.

[44] Botello, interview, March 20, 2009.

[45] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[46] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[47] Philliber, telephone interview, May 13, 2009.

[48] Newton, telephone interview, April 13,

2009.

[49] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[50] Gaydosik, interview, April 3, 2009.

[51] Whitehouse, interview, March 17, 2009.

[52] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[53] Gerry Power (director of research and knowledge management, BBC World Service Trust), Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop at Global Forum for Media Development Summit, Athens, Greece, December 8, 2008.

[54] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[55] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

[56] Mark Whitehouse, Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop at Global Forum for Media Development Summit, Athens, Greece, December 9, 2008.

[57] Kumar, interview, April 20, 2009.

[58] Newton, telephone interview, April 13, 2009.

[59] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[60] Sofie Jannusch (Catholic Media Council), Monitoring and Evaluation Workshop at Global Forum for Media Development Summit, Athens, Greece, December 8, 2008

[61] Bettina Peters, "Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook/Toolkit: Proposal for a Joint Initiative by Media Development Implementers," Global Forum for Media Development, http://85.17.92.7/~gfmd/images/uploads/Handbook.pdf.

[62] Whitehouse, interview, March 17, 2009.

[63] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

[64] Butler, interview, March 20, 2009.

[65] Oatley, interview, March 26, 2009.

[66] Rouse, interview, April 2, 2009.

Advisory Council
for the
Center for International Media Assistance

Center for International Media Assistance

National Endowment for Democracy
1025 F Street, N.W., 8th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

Phone: (202) 378-9700
Fax: (202) 378-9407
Email: CIMA@ned.org

URL: http://cima.ned.org

CIMA Center for International Media Assistance

NED National Endowment for Democracy
Supporting freedom around the world