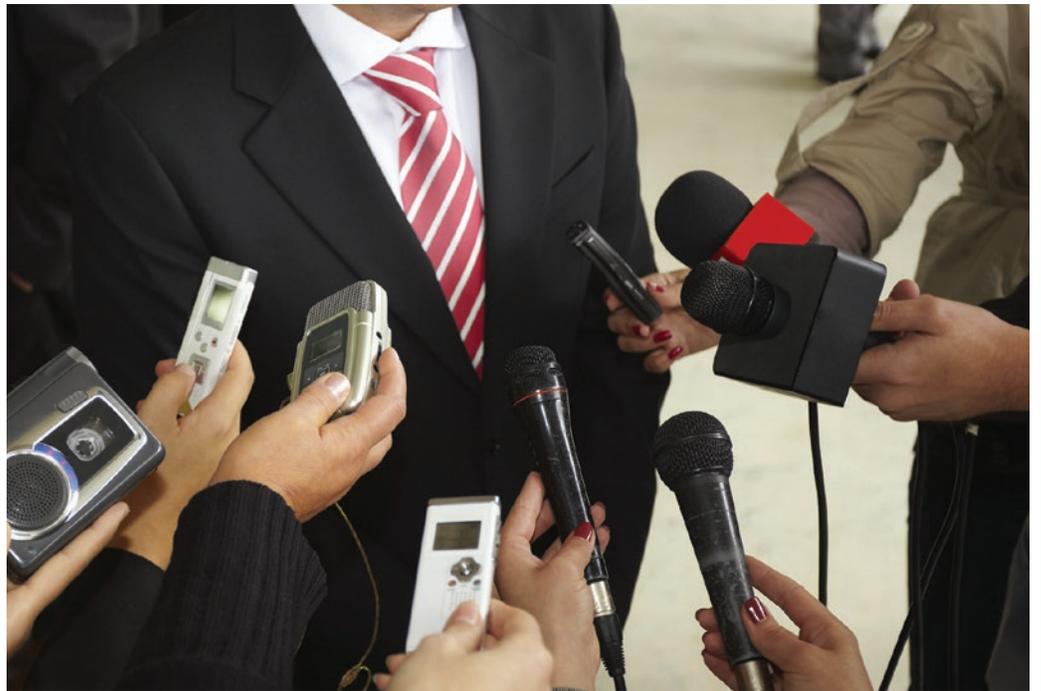


Telling It Straight: How Trustworthy Government Information Promotes Better Media

BY MARGUERITE HOXIE SULLIVAN

November 2014





ABOUT CIMA

The **Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)**, at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. 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.

**Center for International Media Assistance
National Endowment for Democracy**

1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20004
PHONE: (202) 378-9700
FAX: (202) 378-9407
EMAIL: CIMA@ned.org
URL: <http://cima.ned.org>

Mark Nelson
SENIOR DIRECTOR

Telling It Straight: How Trustworthy Government Information Promotes Better Media

NOVEMBER 2014

CONTENTS

About the Author	1
Introduction	2
Challenges	7
Who Does the Work	16
Sidebar: Who Supports the Work	17
Recommendations	19
Conclusion	25
Endnotes	26

**ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR THE CENTER FOR
INTERNATIONAL MEDIA ASSISTANCE**

- | | |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Esther Dyson | Craig LaMay |
| Stephen Fuzesi, Jr. | Caroline Little |
| William A. Galston | William Orme |
| Suzanne Garment | Dale Peskin |
| Ellen Hume | Adam Clayton Powell III |
| Jerry Hyman | Monroe E. Price |
| Alex S. Jones | Rep. Adam Schiff |
| Shanthi Kalathil | Kurt Wimmer |
| Susan King | Richard Winfield |



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marguerite H. Sullivan is a media and communications consultant and former senior director of the Center on International Media Assistance (CIMA), which she set up in 2006 and directed until 2013. She has worked as a journalist, public affairs and communications specialist, and an executive in government and international nongovernmental organizations.

During her stewardship of CIMA, she was widely regarded as having raised the visibility and importance of the media development field and was instrumental in organizing the first major international media development donors conference.

Sullivan is the author of the U.S. Department of State's *A Responsible Press Office in the Digital Age* and *A Responsible Press Office: An Insider's Guide*, which have been translated into numerous languages and won several awards. She has assessed and advised on systems of open communication and transparency and worked on capacity building through nearly 200 training and speaking engagements in more than 40 countries.

She began her career as a journalist at newspapers in Boston and California before moving to Washington, DC, where she was a reporter and columnist for a national news service covering Congress and the federal government. She served as president of the Washington Press Club (now the National Press Club), worked as executive editor of a women's magazine, and authored a number of articles.

Sullivan has held several positions in the U.S. government, including at the White House, the Department of State, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, and she served as a cabinet member for a state governor. She was executive director of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO. Sullivan also was vice president for communications and external affairs for the International Republican Institute and has conducted workshops for the National Democratic Institute, both of which are closely affiliated with the National Endowment for Democracy. She currently represents the United States on UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC) and represents North America and Western Europe on IPDC's Bureau, which awards media development grants.

Sullivan has a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in journalism from Stanford University. She was a fellow at the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School at Harvard University and a U.S. Senate-confirmed member of the U.S. National Council on the Humanities. She also serves on the board of the National Press Club Journalism Institute and is a Fulbright Specialist.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Many of the countries cited in this report as examples of the challenges to developing effective, transparent government communications are not identified by name. This is to protect the identities of officials who spoke frankly of their frustrations and inability to do their jobs. In addition, I have written about my experiences over a number of years; the situations in some countries may have changed—either for the better or for the worse. And although examples of these challenges might seem unique to one country, they often turn up in other regions. For example, the fear of using social media cited in one country, I found, was replicated in many others. So singling out individual countries by name would not only have reduced many of the details that I was able to use in this report, it would have limited my ability to describe a complete picture of the global nature of these issues.



Introduction

In the finance ministry of a country that was once part of the Soviet Union, the press secretary must take every reporter's questions to the minister, who decides which staff member can answer, and the response once written must go back to the minister for approval. The process can take weeks, often after the reporter on deadline has produced the story without the ministry's information.

In a Middle East country, a long-time immigration officer is designated as the only person to speak to the media. In addition to press secretary duties, he also handles other ministry jobs. On trips for these, he turns off his press cellphone. When he returned from one trip, he was surprised that a popular TV interview program had put on camera an empty chair with his name on it because the reporters had not been able to reach him.

In one Asian country, a key ministry has no dedicated press operation, no full-time spokesperson, not even a press list. Information is released only to government-owned media, which most citizens disregard. The minister says he and his staff won't work with the independent media as they only report rumors and misinformation. He doesn't understand that he has to engage with journalists for the ministry's side of the story to be presented.



These scenarios are repeated around the globe. In new and emerging democracies, in countries coming out of conflict, in societies in transition where for decades information was repressed, being open with the public through the press and disseminating reliable information in a systematized and responsive fashion is a new concept. Yet, just as the media are crucial to informing the public, so too are governments in getting out information that reporters and hence citizens can use.

The U.S. government spends millions of dollars annually in international aid to build the capacities of independent journalists, but these funds can be wasted unless the capacities of government officials and their spokespersons to communicate openly are also built. This means steering official spokespersons away from a culture of public relations spin and propaganda and instead helping to build a responsive and responsible information office that interacts with reporters and citizens on the programs and plans of government.

While countries in transition are each unique, their communication problems aren't. They range from no dedicated press office to a spokesperson with no authority to one with many other responsibilities and no staff. These problems may also stem from little communication coordination among government ministries and conflicting information coming from numerous government officials, or the problem may be that a government actively avoids reporters or operates only in crisis communication mode and is not proactive and able to explain its policies and plans.

For almost two decades, I have written, assessed, trained, and advised on setting up systems of open communication and transparency through nearly 200 engagements in more than 40 countries on every continent, except Australia and Antarctica. The work has been supported by the Department of State, U.S. embassies, and USAID, often in partnership with a local nongovernmental organization, university, or regional or national government requesting assistance. And while I have done communications capacity building with civil society groups, political party activists, and journalists, much of the focus has been on building communications capacities at all levels and branches of governments.

I have found that in many transitioning democracies as well as more developed ones, the maturity of government communication capacities often lags behind that of the media. Too often government



Photos: Marguerite Sullivan

The author in Paraguay and Bhutan.



communication has been plugged in as an afterthought in a development project, and treated as part of a communications campaign strategy rather than as an integral part of achieving media freedom.

The consequences can be serious: Freedom of the press cannot thrive unless the government understands the role of an independent media in a democracy and has developed sustained systems of communicating with reporters and the public. A transparent and functional government communications operation is critical for independent media to thrive—or even just survive.

Effective government communications also has an impact on the overall outcomes of government. Citizens are more likely to support government reforms and participate more constructively in their governance if the information helps them understand the aims and directions of policies. Quality government communications is part of a feedback loop that helps governments implement reforms, get useful reactions from citizens, and make adjustments when necessary.

Often such communications operations come up short, if they exist at all.

When an autocratic government falls and a new, more democratic one emerges; when there is a dramatic change in government; or when an existing administration wants its communication environment to be more open, media development specialists rush in. Their first targets are journalists. The theory goes that creating better journalists leads to better journalism and that developing the independent media and working with reporters to practice balanced, unbiased reporting will result in credible information that will lead to a more informed citizenry and result in a stronger democracy. Only much later is attention paid to government officials who should be providing information to journalists. And then it may be too late.

The scenario is typical: A country opens up. Unlike the way things worked under the previous government, newly trained reporters ask

The consequences can be serious: Freedom of the press cannot thrive unless the government understands the role of an independent media in a democracy and has developed, sustained systems of communicating with reporters and the public. A transparent and functional government communications operation is critical for independent media to thrive—or even just survive.

questions off the designated topic of a press conference; they produce stories on topics on which a government wants to remain silent; reporters on deadline need information right now, not next week. They may write negative but valid stories about government policies. Not understanding the Fourth Estate's role as government watchdog, the officials may return to their former authoritarian behavior and clamp down on the independent media. Journalists will be harassed, jailed, even killed, and independent media outlets shut down. Think Egypt and Russia, to name just two.

In fiscal year 2013, the U.S. through USAID and the State Department, excluding the public diplomacy budget, spent more than \$109 million on media freedom and freedom of information activities in its foreign assistance budget. The media category, in the "Governing Justly and Democratically" subsector of foreign assistance has six activities:

- Supporting the enabling legal environment for media.
- Boosting the professional and institutional capacity of media.
- Building a financially sustainable media sector.
- Strengthening media associations.
- Establishing community radio and newspapers and multi-media community centers.
- Sensitizing government officials to the role of independent media.

The government communications section for the media development assistance programs states:

Assist with government public information campaigns and other related activities. Also, in the context of sensitizing government officials to the role of independent media, assist governments in improving their press and public relations capacities, including training of press officers on free media systems and interaction with the media, promotion of e-government capacities, restoration/recovery/cataloguing of archival media materials, and building other communications capacities.¹

The media freedom and freedom of information categories—financial sustainability, the legal enabling environment for media, independent media and professional journalists, supportive associations, community media, and government communication capacity building—make up the pieces of the media development puzzle. Without each one, the puzzle of a functioning independent media in a democracy is not whole.

Too often the government piece is missing.

In fiscal year 2013, the U.S. through USAID and the State Department, excluding the public diplomacy budget, spent more than \$109 million on media freedom and freedom of information activities in its foreign assistance budget.





“The government communication functions in developing countries are dreary backwaters of low skills,” states a World Bank Brief for Policymakers. The report, entitled *The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes* and produced by a former unit of the bank, the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGap), goes on to say:

In many of these contexts, communication positions are lacking in government offices—even when establishing them would make sense. They are left vacant when they do exist, or are assigned as civil servants’ secondary, low-priority tasks. Ministries of Information are seen as propaganda machines—with the primary purpose of pushing out information biased toward “any government in power”—with no capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue with constituents. Agencies and bureaus charged with collecting and managing government data and statistics are often under resourced and frequently lack the capacity to carry out their mandates.²

The challenges government communicators face range from “disinterest by politicians in government communications to inadequate resources to uncooperative public servants,” wrote Bert W. Edes, who examined government communication challenges in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. His findings in “The Role of Government Information Officers” in the *Journal of Government Information* hold true for countries in transition today:

An information officer will be in a much better position to work confidently and effectively in an administrative environment in which he or she is adequately remunerated, where civil servants are hired and promoted on the basis of merit under clear rules, where the legal and managerial expectation is that information should be made readily available to the public, and where adequate training and guidance are provided.³

Challenges

Those seeking to establishing responsible and effective government press information offices and practices face a plethora of problems. These run the gamut from no government press office existing at all, and press policies that discourage government engagement with the media, to outright antagonism between government officials and reporters.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENTS AND JOURNALISTS

Even in mature democracies, the relationship between government officials and journalists can be difficult—and in some cases it should be. Government and media need each other, but the relationship should be one that enables the press to fulfill its watchdog role and hold governments accountable.

In transitioning countries, government officials typically complain that journalists working for independent media don't get it right. "Our journalists are young, inexperienced and don't check the facts," one Asian official said. "They only report negative news and look for scandals and controversy. So we work only with government media that tells our story."

On the other hand, reporters complain that they have no access to government officials and when they do, they don't get a response on important issues. Lacking government input, reporters explain they must go elsewhere for information that might be incorrect or incomplete. "The government just doesn't understand the media's role of informing the public," lamented an African reporter.

The often piece-meal implementation of media development projects presents another challenge. As a World Bank Brief for Policymakers pointed out, a donor initiative to strengthen independent media would typically have a module on interacting with government officials "who are expected to answer questions professionally... Yet at the same time, there may not be corresponding programs designed to support the government's ability to both understand and deal with media professionals who are being trained to ask tough but fair questions. The process of deepening accountability is thus arrested... Untrained officials may never grow accustomed to the process of information-sharing and lively debate with civil society, and may continue to hoard information and resist attempts at transparency. This leads to further deterioration of the public sphere."⁴





BUY-IN OF THE BOSS

The boss can be the biggest challenge. Press secretaries often lament that they have little to no contact with their bosses—those on whose behalf they are supposed to speak.

In one Middle East country, a ministry spokesman complained that his minister cut him out entirely, even arranging his own media interviews. The spokesman was not surprised when he saw an al-Jazeera camera crew setting up. He went to the reporter, asked the interview topic, told the minister, and gave him on-camera interview tips. “You know all that?” the minister answered in surprise. He had not understood how a press secretary could help him.

A former president of Paraguay used to call his own press conferences, surprising even his media staff. “The president does his own press,” a spokesman sighed with resignation.

Shut out from senior management meetings where decisions are made, the spokesman becomes an uninformed technician—the person who puts up microphones at a press conference—not a strategist who can offer advice to senior colleagues and speak knowledgeably on government plans and policies with reporters.

“Political leaders often see the GIO (government information officer) as just some kind of a mailbox for delivering messages,” Edes wrote. “This simplistic view overlooks the key role of communications in promoting public understanding of, and support for, public policies. GIOs should be involved throughout the decision-making process to advise on the implementation and explanation of public policies to the media and to the population at large.”⁵

In many countries, no one wants to be spokesperson. An Asian government official was quite blunt: “It is the last job a civil servant would want. The spokesperson has no access, no prestige. He is not in on meetings; he is not aware of what is happening. He has no resources and no staff. And he gets in trouble with his boss when he talks to the press. Overall it is a lose/lose situation. He doesn’t speak unless he is forced to, and ultimately the spokesperson is not effective.”

CLOSED BUREAUCRACIES

A “culture of silence” exists in which people are afraid to talk about sensitive issues, in particular to foreign correspondents, said Jonathan Karl, at the time an ABC senior national security correspondent, at a CIMA discussion in 2007 on the status of media in Sudan. Although Karl was talking about Sudan, his views could be applied to many countries around the globe. In Asia, for example, an official complained, “Information is power. The government gets information and locks it up.”

While reporters looking for information often feel stonewalled by press secretaries, so too do press secretaries trying to get information from their bureaucracies.

“The rest of the ministry doesn’t understand why they should give me information that will go to reporters. They don’t understand my role. So I have just stopped trying,” admitted an Asian ministry spokesman.

Without clear messages from government executives to their staffs on the importance of helping press offices get information, spokespersons will always be stymied in their jobs.

NO RESPONSIBILITY

In a former Soviet Union country, a press secretary said she was ordered to put out press releases without knowing the contents. “I have no knowledge of what is happening,” she said. An Asian spokesperson said he was “afraid to talk to reporters. I have no job protection and am worried I will lose my job if I say something wrong.” In an Eastern European country even the status of the job is questioned. Communications or press officers were not included in the official listing of professions but fortune teller was.

“The civil servant is the silent service,” said an Asian spokesperson. “No one really understands what is the role and function of the government spokesperson.”

TOO MANY JOBS

Too often the spokesperson plays a number of roles besides working with reporters, and media relations takes a back seat.

In a Central European country, the government’s general prosecutor’s office had no spokesperson. Two communication specialists were hired but soon were overwhelmed by calls from reporters around the



© International Rivers / Flickr
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>)

“The civil servant is the silent service,” said an Asian spokesperson. “No one really understands what is the role and function of the government spokesperson.”

country with questions related to regional information. Eventually in each regional office, a prosecutor was named as regional spokesperson. Each had to maintain his (all were men) prosecutorial workload and receive no additional pay. None was allowed to decline the additional assignment, and no one had any media experience. “I have no idea what I am doing,” one prosecutor/spokesperson admitted. “I don’t even know how to write a press release.” Over several years, however, through a series of separate workshops, supported by the U.S. embassy and German legal organizations, this spokesman and his colleagues developed skills to handle the spokesperson role.

CULTURE OF PERMISSION

Sometimes routine information remains taboo unless the top official releases it. In a Balkan country, the chief of staff to an economic ministry had many assignments besides media. When reporters called, he stipulated he could only take questions; the minister alone would answer. When an international reporter telephoned to confirm published tourism statistics, the chief of staff had to call the minister, who was traveling to an international conference. The minister returned the call four days later, after the story with old and incorrect figures had been published.

In Africa, a press secretary griped, “I have been reprimanded for giving out information to a journalist—even information already in the public—unless I get permission first from the minister. Giving information to the press is viewed as ‘leaking’ and not informing the public.”

MISUNDERSTANDING THE NEWS BUSINESS

Too often, the government officials just don’t get the journalism basics: how news is gathered, what deadlines mean, why government pronouncements are questioned, why press releases are not run verbatim, why reporters ask questions off the announced topic of the press conference. They take criticism of policy decisions as personal



© World Bank Photo Collection / Flickr (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

insults and don't understand that reporters must shape still unformed government polices into a communication that fits into a framework the public can understand.

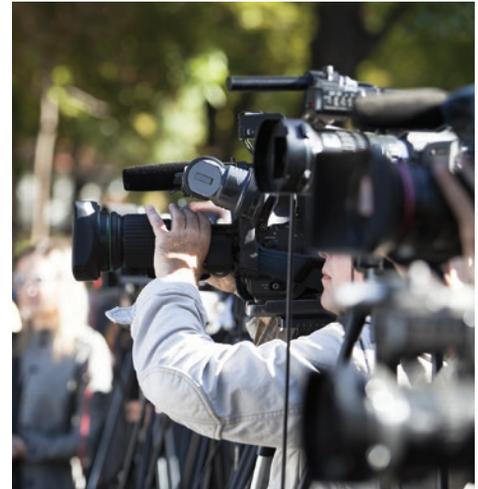
A minister in a former Soviet Union country held a press conference about organizational changes in his ministry just as the government was going through a major corruption probe. Reporters only asked questions and did resulting stories about the scandal, not the reorganization. The minister was furious and blamed his press secretary. "He just couldn't understand reporters won't talk about the issues we want them to talk about," the press secretary griped.

"My boss, the mayor, thinks I can order reporters to write the story he wants as had occurred when we were part of the Soviet Union," confided a Ukrainian spokesperson several years ago, adding when this didn't happen, the mayor ordered his spokesperson to block the reporter from press conferences. Reporters' deadlines are often given little attention. An African minister summed up a prevalent attitude: "Oh just let them hold up the presses if they want my story. I give it when I want." And a Sudan press official said at the 2007 CIMA meeting, "We are a very delicate country with a lot of delicate issues. If you let everything go [without regulation] there will be chaos."⁶ Another African official admitted, "In my country, we avoid journalists because they only stir things up. They put out news that upsets people."

In a Central European country, each Thursday, the Interior Ministry spokesperson had a weekly press conference during which all the week's news was announced. If there was an explosion on Monday, the spokesperson talked about it on Thursday. Often he announced ten news items, but only three were picked up by news organizations. The spokesperson and his bosses didn't understand that media have to put out news every day, not just on the one day the ministry wants.

FEW PROCEDURES

Too often, government institutions lack consistent procedures for communication. In a Latin American country, the top court had no system for releasing decisions. Some judges would talk to the press before giving out a ruling; others would release a ruling through attorneys on one side of a case; some judges worked with the court communications office; and others would not release their rulings at all. "We have no system, no observed procedure," a court executive admitted.



Shutterstock

...in a Central European country, one ministry put out one position in a press release; another ministry a conflicting one. Rather than the issue being the news, the differing opinions turned into a government conflict and dominated the headlines.

LITTLE TO NO COORDINATION

Intra- and inter-ministry communication coordination is often nonexistent. In the U.S. government, the communication model is “hub-and-spoke” with the White House communications and press offices as the hub and federal agencies and departments’ public affairs or press offices as the spokes. Information passes back and forth constantly on the spokes with the result that messages are well coordinated. In many countries, communication coordination doesn’t exist. There is no clearance system in the development of comprehensive talking points, press releases, and messages for a consistent message across government.

On a thorny issue, very much in the news in a Central European country, one ministry put out one position in a press release; another ministry a conflicting one. Rather than the issue being the news, the differing opinions turned into a government conflict and dominated the headlines.

COMMUNICATION THAT IS REACTIVE, NOT PROACTIVE OR STRATEGIC

Too often press offices operate in a reactive mode—reacting to the flow of news—rather than developing a strategic communications plan to explain government policies. And in emergency situations, there may be little outreach. A workshop participant in an African country confessed that he never thought about reaching out to journalists when the annual natural disaster—floods—began. “I just wait for reporters to call me. I never thought about reaching out to them,” he said.

AVOIDING DIALOGUE WITH CITIZENS

Even when a government has regular press conferences, puts out releases, grants media interviews, and frequently updates its website, it is only partially communicating. Today government communication must be two-way—a dialogue between government and citizens.

“Government communication capacity is not just about efficient and effective information dissemination. The ability to ‘push out’ information is necessary, albeit deeply insufficient,” states the World Bank’s CommGAP report, *The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes*. “The willingness and ability to speak with citizens must be coupled with a willingness and ability to listen to them, incorporate their needs and preferences into the policy process, and engage local patterns of influence and trusted sources of information.”⁷

There is no better way to do this than engaging in social media. Yet, many governments are slow to embrace it for fear of citizens' negative comments or out of concern over expense or staff time.

Precisely those fears prevented the second biggest city in a former Soviet Union country, more wired than most, from engaging in social media. Officials had a web page but worried social media would require additional personnel, cost too much in time and money, and elicit negative citizen comments. The naysaying was prevalent among older staff in supervisory and decision-making positions. Into the void stepped a citizen who started a Facebook page with the regional logo and listings of officials with their addresses and phone numbers. Events were listed and citizen comments posted. "Citizens are viewing this as the official regional page," a regional government official grumbled. "But we only intervene if information is incorrect."

Because of government slowness to embrace social media, a number of spokespersons have begun tweeting and posting official government information from their personal accounts. Messages get out but often in an ad hoc manner, and the use of personal social media sites for official pronouncement is open to abuse.

In a Middle East country, at his home in the evening, a local police spokesman began putting out crime and accident data on his personal Facebook and Twitter accounts. "I wanted to increase public awareness, so I asked no permission, I just started doing it," he said. Sometimes he re-tweeted or posted press releases or statements he had given the media during the day from work. Within months, he had over 10,000 followers. "People seek help or want to know where to go if they have a problem," he said. "I try to get conversations going, as well as respond to followers' questions." While he sees his activity as a public service,



Because of government slowness to embrace social media, a number of spokespersons have begun tweeting and posting official government information from their personal accounts. Messages get out but often in an ad hoc manner, and the use of personal social media sites for official pronouncement is open to abuse.



© meemoo / Flickr (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/>)

Freedom of information laws, now on the books in nearly a hundred countries... in many cases... exist only on paper, are poorly understood by government officials as well as citizens and the media, and are seldom implemented or enforced.



he is concerned about using his personal accounts. “Having no official address, anyone could post information that would be bogus,” he admitted. He said his dialogue with citizens has created one big benefit: “It has cut down on frivolous questions I get at the office.”

TOOTHLESS FREEDOM OF INFORMATION LAWS

One of the most effective tools to help citizens and media gain access to government actions and hold them accountable are freedom of information laws, now on the books in nearly a hundred countries. But in many cases they exist only on paper, are poorly understood by government officials as well as citizens and the media, and are seldom implemented or enforced. In some countries, the law is even used to stonewall journalists. In a former Soviet Union country, reporters complained that government spokespersons answered within the requisite two weeks but then bumped the freedom of information request to another ministry, which took the two weeks to bump it to another and so on.

A 2013 CIMA report lamented that many FOIA laws “are exemplary on paper. But many are also poorly implemented. Surprisingly but commonly, citizens, national and local public officials, and journalists are often unaware that such laws even exist, much less how they work.” Challenges also include conflicting laws, official confusion and timidity, poor enforcement, and inadequate funding, wrote the authors of *Breathing Life into Freedom of Information Laws: The Challenges of Implementation in the Democratizing World*.⁸

PROPAGANDA

The question of the difference between government propaganda and legitimate government information constantly crops up. At a session for new Asian legislators, for example, one official coming out of a decades-long authoritarian government, argued that all government information was propaganda.

This shouldn’t be the case.

The World Bank–GW Rapporteur’s report summed it up:

Government communication involves not only sending out persuasive messages to the public, but also explaining working policies, creating awareness of the rights of citizens, and developing mechanism that enable two-way communication between citizens and government. It is a fundamental challenge

to make donors and governments understand that government communication is not propaganda. "Information development" may be a more suitable brand to generate support for government communication. There are two sides to information development: First, a culture of disclosure needs to be created; and second, governments need to have relevant information available. That said, every government is involved in propaganda to at least some extent. The challenge is to motivate governments to utilize their communication structures and resources for other kinds of information and to limit propaganda.⁹



Programs are most effective when they are not designed to tell officials what to say but rather to build their capacities to put out information in a transparent manner.

CAPACITY VERSUS CONTENT

In training government spokesmen, getting capacity building versus content building correct is important. Programs are most effective when they are not designed to tell officials what to say but rather to build their capacities to put out information in a transparent manner.

An NGO doing communications capacity building in an African country unfortunately got so involved with the government that it wrote the state's press releases and speeches, crafted its communications strategy, and spent little time partnering with the staff to do its own communications work.

The adage should be: Build capacity, not dependency.

SCORES OF OTHER PROBLEMS

Other challenges include:

- Poor media monitoring and archiving of government statements.
- Government spokespersons who don't know each other and hence have little professional connections or venues to share best practices and develop ethical standards.
- Little to no budget and equipment. In some offices there may be a computer, but it might not be connected to the Internet.
- Low skill in news writing so that, for example, the lead of a news item is buried at the bottom of a press release.
- Confusion on who can talk to reporters in governments that have ministries of information. Is it a ministry spokesperson or only the ministry of information spokesperson?
- Few to no public administration classes, communication training courses, or civil service laws.

Who Does the Work

Although government communications capacity building is categorized as an activity under media freedom and freedom of information, none of the major nonprofit media development organizations work on government communications capacity building as a regular part of their portfolios. Generally no one addresses it “head on” as a major program component, said Drusilla Menaker, IREX’s senior media advisor and director of communities of practice. The engagement occurs when an organization’s work in media development, such as developing journalists’ ability to report on a story, leads to necessary interaction with a government.



© American Spirit / Shutterstock.com

This happened in an IREX media strengthening project in Rwanda, funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation. “In the process of our projects with journalists, every once in a while the government would take steps against the media,” said Robert Pearson, former president of IREX. “Although it was not directly in our project mandate, we also took opportunities to talk with government officials to increase government understanding of the role of the press. We could not make progress without engaging both sides in a discussion. You do not get progress unless you have the main stakeholders willing to talk to each other and understand each other.”

Calling government communications capacity building “a critical element of growing a healthy information ecosystem,” Jeanne Bourgault, president of Internews said. “In general, we believe that such work should be done at arms-length from work to support independent media, as it is very important to be clear that any support to media is not connected to/contingent on specific coverage of government activities. We do take on this work when we are able to make these clear distinctions, though prefer to work through different partners to really emphasize the appropriate roles and responsibilities.”

An Internews HIV and public health media training program in Kenya, funded by the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, is an example. “The HIV story could not have been told well without building the government’s communication capacities,” said Ida Jooste, country director. Internews trained officials of several ministries on how to engage with the media, do a TV interview, and identify a story. “For example, we discussed that a story is not about announcing that a clinic would be open but is about how Mrs. So-and-So would be helped if the clinic were open. We helped them see a story through a journalist’s eye so they did not waste their time on PR.”

Anthony Borden, executive director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), said his organization has engaged governments when it has 'had to' meet its goal of making "the environment for information flow and debate better."

Several years ago in Iraq, for example, IWPR did training on social media skills for both government officials and reporters. "Not only did we not have to do the training twice, but the two groups got to know each other," Borden said. "It was remarkable how little contact they had. They learned skills around a topic and at the end better understood each other."

Implementers typically don't mix trainers.

"Our preference is to have separate, clearly defined specialists advising press offices and skilled journalists working with journalists. While we recognize that people often shift from journalism to press relations (and vice versa), when building capacity of either area, the differentiation is critically important," Bourgault said.

Who Supports the Work

Building a government's communication capacities comprises but a small segment of media freedom and freedom of information support. And when support is given, donors often focus on only one sector or thematic area rather than taking a holistic, government-wide approach. Sometimes the focus is on a key ministry, such as health or agriculture. Sometimes it might be to the center of government—the president or prime minister—with a goal that the work will spread throughout the system.

USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance is where much media development activity occurs. In crisis, transition, or immediate post-conflict situations, its **Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI)**, "provides fast, flexible, short-term assistance targeted at key political transition and stabilization needs... In countries transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy,

from violence to peace, or following a fragile peace, OTI's programs serve as catalysts for positive political change."¹

Supporting emerging independent media is an important element of OTI's media work, as is helping build a government's strategic communications capacity. But often this assistance accounts for a small part of an overall country program. The work is not only about capacity building, such as training, but can also involve supplying equipment or other infrastructure support. In Haiti, for example, after the earthquake in 2011, OTI help set up a temporary government press center where the Haitian government could hold daily press conferences and then placed technical communication advisors in the Ministry of Culture and Communication to help improve daily government outreach activities.



© arindambanerjee / Shutterstock.com

(continues next page)

¹ <http://www.usaid.gov/who-we-are/organization/bureaus/bureau-democracy-conflict-and-humanitarian-assistance/office-1>

The bureau's democracy, human rights and governance programs take a long-term capacity building perspective. Media development can be part of this, and building government communication capacity an even smaller percentage. In addition, many USAID programs include activities within sector-specific development programs. Work in public health, for example, would be considered media for development, using information disseminated through media outlets to foster behavior change or effect a specific outcome. This might be persuading people to use condoms to limit the spread of HIV or mosquito netting to decrease incidents of malaria or be efforts to counter female genital mutilation.

The main media-related programs at the State Department of which government communications capacity building is a part fall under public diplomacy. Its **Bureau of International Information Programs (IIP)** and **Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs** have several programs that bring journalists, digital media experts, and government spokespersons to the United States and send Americans in those fields overseas.

IIP's **Speakers and Specialists program** recruits more than 650 speakers annually to engage audiences overseas, both in person and through virtual events, in more than 30 subject categories. Included in these are media and journalism as well as information and communication. About 20 percent of the short-term speaking programs, usually no more than a week or two in duration, relate to media. And of this, only a small fraction centers on building government communications capacities.

IIP also publishes publications and posters, which are distributed by embassies and consulates to foreign audiences. A handful relate to media, such as handbooks on journalism, media law, and government press offices.

The Educational and Cultural Affairs Bureau has many programs, including Fulbright programs and International Visitor Leadership Programs. Both engage government spokespersons in professional exchanges. Public diplomacy has a number of other parts. A public diplomacy effort helped establish the Government Media Information Center in Kabul and worked on four others for regional governors in Afghanistan.

U.S. embassies have let small grants to bring experts to countries, usually for short consultations, and other U.S. government departments have programs, which concentrate often on media for development.

The **World Bank** typically focuses on specific governmental sectors such as finance ministries and central banks or on topics such as access to information or training journalists around budget literacy and data mining and handling.

For four years, the **World Bank** and the **University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism** have run a 10-day boot camp at USC, called Reform Communication: Leadership, Strategy and Stakeholder Alignment. More than 30 government participants from developing countries pay \$5,000 plus housing and transportation costs to study communication techniques to implement difficult reforms, such as removing petroleum subsidies. Many of the attendees are not communication specialists but rather senior government officials responsible for sector reforms.



Photo: World Bank-Annenberg Summer Institute

The program is an outgrowth of the British-funded **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)** at the World Bank. Through research, training, and support, CommGAP's goal was "demonstrating the power of communication in promoting good and accountable governance and hence better development results." The program ended in 2011 at the end of a five-year grant from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID).

But clearly the largest communications development budgets go to media for development. "Governments and international organizations say they do communications capacity building, but they are really training to put out a message," an official with an international organization said. He asked to remain anonymous because of his criticisms. "They have a problem seeing media as part of development, and it is easier for them to say, 'We have a health program in X country so we need to build the capacity of the government to communicate on such-and-such a health issue and do a program on radio in X country.'"

Recommendations

HOLISTIC VIEW

When evaluating strengths and weaknesses of the media in a country, donors should also analyze government communication capacity building and laws and regulations that are punitive to an independent press, such as criminal libel. Subsequent program design should encompass all three.

SEPARATE BUT LINKED

The projects for government officials and reporters should be separate but the strategy connected. The process of developing an independent media and strengthening government communication capacity should not be fused, a World Bank CommGap report stated. “In fact, it is preferable in practice for these activities to be kept separate, with a firewall between government communication and independent media development... What should be stressed, however, is the strategic nature of planning for communication-sector activities” so that the different categories mutually reinforce each other to have “balanced interdependence.”¹⁰



© USAID / Flickr (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/)

CHANGE MUST BE COUNTRY-DRIVEN

For media reforms to take root, media, citizens, but especially governments must want it to happen. Sometimes projects begin when a government official asks an embassy for help. That is what happened in a new European democracy. The prime minister’s spokesperson asked the U.S. embassy public affairs office for assistance. A specialist was sent to the country through the Speaker and Specialist program of the State Department’s International Information Programs to partner with the staff on training. At the request of the spokesperson, the specialist made several repeat visits. The engagement was successful, and communication with the media and the public shifted from one solely in crisis mode to one of more openness and public discussion of the government’s plans and policies.

DONOR COORDINATION

When carried out in silos, media development work can be ineffective or can create duplication of effort, and this is also true of donor support that is not coordinated.

In a country formerly part of the Soviet Union, donors met regularly with the prime minister's spokesman, at his request, to discuss how to support the government's planned communication reform, which included not only training journalists and government spokespersons and officials, but also legislative and regulatory reform. Each donor country agreed to support different aspects in an attempt to avoid duplication of efforts.

GOOD GOVERNANCE

In the U.S. government, building government communication capacity falls under the State Department's and USAID's media freedom and freedom of information category. It should also exist in the good governance category. Until it is acknowledged as part of good governance, a government communication capabilities may be viewed more as messaging—such as a efforts to change behavior in a public health campaign—rather than as an important element to achieve a more sustained open government.

REMEMBER THE BOSS

Too often communications capacity training ends with the press secretary; the ministers to whom they report are not convinced that they should work with independent media, which often criticizes them. This can be a difficult challenge, even in long-democratized countries, but successes have occurred by:

- Partnering with a few receptive and reformist ministers and their bureaucracies in intensive communications capacity building. As the ministries become more engaged with the media, the additional coverage that results from more responsiveness and openness may entice other ministries, initially more recalcitrant, to follow.
- Engaging one on one with high level officials, particularly on-camera practice. Some officials suffer from terrible broadcast presence and only need their confidence built to handle media questions.
- Bringing top-level government officials together for a day or weekend retreat, either with or without their press secretaries, to develop a plan for more open government.



© Paolo Bona / Shutterstock.com

Two examples from Balkan countries demonstrate what can work:

- In one, a highly respected international spokesperson whose spouse was a well-known foreign correspondent was the keynote speaker at a dinner of ministers. The topic: Why engaging with the media and the public in a democracy was essential.
- In another country, three reformist ministers engaged in intensive one-on-one and occasionally group communication skills building. Their increased access and more thorough coverage of their ministries was noted by others in government as well as the public.

Joint sessions for spokespersons and their bosses also work. In a workshop, for local government spokespersons in Ukraine, mayors were invited for the first morning of the sessions. At the conclusion, several mayors admitted they were now going to establish stand-alone press offices and eliminate their spokespersons' other duties. "I just hadn't understood the need in a democracy to communicate in a systematic way with the public. Now I do," one mayor said.

BRING JOURNALISTS AND SPOKESPERSONS TOGETHER

Joint workshops for journalists and government spokespersons help "clear the air." They allow discussion and venting about frustrations with each other, with the goal of increasing mutual understandings. Without compromising their natural adversarial relationship, each can understand how the other works, their challenges, and how communication could be improved.

Ideally the program would be run by two facilitators—a local respected journalist or academic and a government communications trainer, who typically might be from another country.

Each group meets separately with its facilitator to discuss frustrations and develop suggestions to improve relations. Subsequently the groups come together to address these concerns and develop solutions. This model is particularly effective, as each group crystallizes its challenges and solutions before the larger meeting, preventing a free-for-all.

In a weekend workshop in Bulgaria in the early 2000s, journalists and government communicators first met separately with a moderator. The second day the groups met together. Journalists complained about how little and often frivolous the information they received from the prime minister's office was. Their example was a prime ministers' meeting the previous week when they had had to go to the press office of the neighboring country to get information. Their government had



Photos: Marguerite Sullivan

The author at a workshop in Serbia.



only released the leaders' official lunch menu and where the meeting occurred, several reporters complained. While the prime minister's spokesman initially complained that reporters had gone elsewhere for information, he soon understood why and pledged to be more open. The workshop resulted in improved media access and an increase in press conferences. The change was so dramatic, reporters even wrote about the positive results of the workshop.

Similar changes resulted from a meeting of journalists and government officials in a Middle East country when the participants drew up a joint statement on better working relationships.

In an Asian country, the joint meeting was not preceded by a preliminary one broken into separate groups. The discussion was initially heated, but by the conclusion, tempers had cooled, and a comprehensive list was drawn up of the grievances on each side with suggestions for how to address them.

SUSTAINED DONOR AND IMPLEMENTER ENGAGEMENT

Donor support often is too short-lived, and programs don't take root as support is withdrawn too early. For example, the positive results from these initial government and media meetings would have continued for some time had the donor continued to support the media centers that organized the meetings.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Government spokespersons often don't know each other. At workshops, trainers are amazed that press secretaries are meeting for the first time.

In many countries, U.S. support has gone to professional associations for journalists, knowing that such groups can increase professional skills and ethical practices. The same holds true for government press secretaries. Supporting their independent associations might help build professionalism.

In an African country, local government spokespersons were so enthusiastic after meeting each other during workshops that they formed a group, elected a governing board, developed a platform, began planning professional programs, and formed a link with the U.S. National Association of Government Communicators. Their one issue was to keep it going. For that they needed funding. A similar national group in the Middle East decided after a workshop to hold monthly discussions.

SOUTH-SOUTH AND ON-SITE KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

Bringing local officials in contact with their peers from countries that have undergone similar challenges can have a great impact. Pairing an international expert with a local specialist works well. The international expert can provide an international perspective and norms and the local expert the local or regional context. On-site consultations are also beneficial, as they keep participants in familiar surroundings, but exchanges can also expose them to a wider world of practice.



© Asianet-Pakistan / Shutterstock.com

EXPAND INTERNATIONAL VISITS

The State Department already brings some government spokespersons to the United States on visits, and this could be enhanced as the program has a big impact. “I had no idea reporters had such access to government press secretaries,” a Kosovo spokesperson said after one such visit. “Reporters actually work out of press rooms in departments. It is a very systematized coordination operation.”

The engagement works best when the exchange is part of a progression—training by an international expert in country; an exchange to the United States with visits to press operations on the national, state, and local levels; followed by one-on-one mentoring in country with the initial expert or another specialist. In recent years, in-country workshops and follow-up visits to the United States have become much better coordinated.

OPEN DATA

The Open Government Partnership is a three-year-old “multilateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption, and harness new technologies to strengthen governance.”¹¹ Sixty-four countries have now signed up. Building government communication capacities—the ability to explain, not spin—should benefit from this initiative.



FOCUS ON CAPACITY BUILDING NOT PROPAGANDA

The rapporteur's report from the World Bank–GW meeting put it best:

Government communication involves not only sending out persuasive messages to the public, but also explaining working policies, creating awareness of the rights of citizens and developing mechanisms that enable two-way communication between citizens and government. It is a fundamental challenge to make donors and governments understand that government communication is not propaganda. "Information development" may be a more suitable brand to generate support for government communication. There are two sides to information development: First, a culture of disclosure needs to be created; and second, governments need to have relevant information available. That said, every government is involved in propaganda to at least some extent. The challenge is to motivate governments to utilize their communication structures and resources for other kinds of information and to limit propaganda.¹²

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Reform of media and broadcasting regulation and laws and passage and implementation of freedom of information laws are crucial and should be part of media development programs. In countries with freedom of information laws, government officials, journalists, and civil society activists need training on their effective implementation.

RESEARCH

There is insufficient research on government communications capacities. In its five years, CommGAP compiled impressive research on the field. It should be reactivated, and the field should be given greater attention by those studying media development and governance.

SCHOOLS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Courses for government officials interested in communications and transparency should be offered. Most schools of public administration do not include courses designed to build skills in government communication capacities.

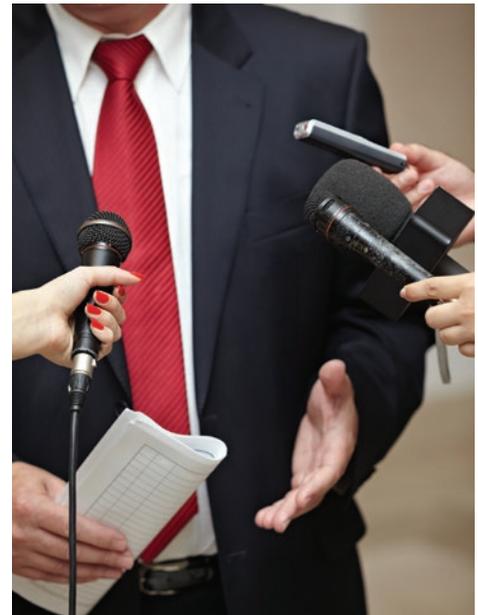
Conclusion

Getting to a well-functioning open government is not easy—even in established democracies. Government communications is challenging in today’s world, which increasingly insists on transparency, accountability, and proactive disclosure, and when news is presented around the clock. At the same time, governments are being called on to communicate across agencies in a coordinated fashion on complicated and specialized topics. All this is occurring at a time of low confidence in government, requiring even more openness and transparency.

Ultimately governments need to understand that it is in their self-interest to communicate.

“Providing citizens with adequate information on priorities, programs and activities ensures the legitimacy of government and therefore stabilizes the political situation in a country. In contrast, when governments face a crisis of legitimacy, they are vulnerable to disruptive forces and may not be able to effectively carry out their mandates. It is therefore in the interest of government to communicate effectively about the work they do on behalf of their constituents,” according to a World Bank report.¹³

An official with a multinational organization that trains government press officers put it another way: “If a couple is to dance the tango, you don’t teach just one of them. You teach both. If only one knows the steps, they can’t dance.” In other words, both journalists and government officials need training. Both must “tango,” and the media development world—donors, implementers and academics—should get in step.



Shutterstock

Endnotes

- ¹ Sub-element 2.4.2.6 – Government Communications of Program Element 2.4.2: Media Freedom and Freedom of Information of Program Area 2.4: Civil Society of Governing Justly & Democratically of the Foreign Assistance Standardized Program Structure and Definitions. 4/8/2010. p. 35 <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/141836.pdf> (www.state.gov)
- ² *The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes*, “Brief for Policymakers,” (World Bank: CommGAP Communication for Governance & Accountability Program). p. 3. <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EXTGOVACC/Resources/BriefGovCommCapacity.pdf>
- ³ Bart W. Edes, “The Role of Government Information Officers,” *Journal of Government Information*, 23 (2000) 455–469. p. 462
- ⁴ *Towards A New Policy Model for Media and Communication in Post-Conflict and Fragile States, A Brief for Policymakers*” (World Bank: CommGAP, Communication for Governance & Accountability Program). p. 3. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGOVACC/Resources/CommGAPBriefs_Post-Conflict_web0908.pdf
- ⁵ Edes p. 460.
- ⁶ *The State of Media in Sudan*, CIMA, 2007, p. 2 http://cima.ned.org/sites/default/files/CIMA-Sudan_Report.pdf
- ⁷ World Bank COMMGAP report, *The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance*. p.1
- ⁸ Craig L. LaMay, Robert J. Freeman, and Richard N. Winfield, *Breathing Life into Freedom of Information Laws: The Challenges of Implementation in the Democratizing World*. Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), September 10, 2013. p. 6.
- ⁹ Rapporteurs’ report, p. 3
- ¹⁰ *Towards a New Policy Model for Media and Communication in Post-Conflict and Fragile States*, p. 32.
- ¹¹ <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/about>
- ¹² Rapporteurs’ report, p. 3
- ¹³ *The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes*, p. 9.

Center for International Media Assistance

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR DEMOCRACY
1025 F STREET, N.W., 8TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20004

PHONE: (202) 378-9700
EMAIL: CIMA@ned.org
URL: <http://cima.ned.org>

