



Strengthening Independent Media Initiative

Special Report

Arguments for Media Development: A Survey of Literature and References

Media Development

Media Development is a general term that refers to the various assistance programs provided by international donors and actors that offer economic, financial, technical and educational assistance to build and strengthen independent media—non-state media enterprises owned by individuals, corporations, and non-profit organizations. Often guided by the belief that independent media are crucial in building a functioning democratic system, international media development programs aim to facilitate the free flow of information, transparency, government accountability, and economic growth.

The US government and American foundations have provided the bulk of funding for media development programs, followed by European and international sources such as the World Bank and the UN. The slow but steady increase in funding over the past two decades has exceeded \$1B by some estimates—reaching in 2006 around \$142M from the US, evenly split between government and private sources, and \$100M from other countries and international organizations. The level and structure of this funding is widely seen as insufficient, uncoordinated, unevenly distributed across regions, and lacking in long-term strategy and scope.

Achievements and Obstacles

Media development programs have helped expand and strengthen independent media enterprises around the world, especially in the past two decades. These programs have helped establish independent media outlets and improve professional standards for journalism, make independent media outlets economically more viable, reform legal and regulatory regimes governing media, and promote media organizations and associations committed to fostering a free press and democracy. However, media projects have not always been effective and they have often faced political and operational problems, including unrealistic targets, failures to meet deadlines, undue reliance on expatriate staff, cost overruns, and limited focus on sustainability.

A New Paradigm?

Traditional media development approaches have focused on training journalists and professionals, building media business capacity, supporting the development of a legal enabling environment, creating associations and professional organizations and, more recently, advancing media literacy. Today, many donors, implementers, and scholars ask if the time is ripe for a new media development paradigm—one that builds on past efforts and encourages more innovative approaches to funding

and sustaining independent media.

The following points highlight leading arguments and recommendations for media development:

Localized Planning and Implementation

Some media development programs have been criticized as being donor-prescribed and ignoring the core challenges facing media in a particular locale. While there may be advantages to centralized strategic planning, media development strategies are increasingly focusing on projects organically built from the ground up and not simply packaged for export.

- Media development programs are more successful when tailored to local needs and designed according to a region's requirements. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.
- A media operation can only thrive when it achieves local buy-in and is run by indigenous journalists and media professionals.

New Media Strategy at the Center

Media development programs have been slow to fully realize the potential of new digital technologies. Many who do utilize new technologies tend to do so in the background, rather than incorporate them strategically.

- New media are having an immense impact on news—including the impact of citizen journalism, cell phones as news devices, bloggers as journalists, social networking sites, viral news distribution, growing online censorship, and shifting business models.

- Cross-platform training helps get buy-in from media owners and managers and legitimizes mid-career education in many regions.
- The low cost, portability, and anonymity of new technologies offer journalists better mobility, more protection from government oppression, and a better chance for sustainability.
- New technologies also support distance learning for journalists, news production online and other operational changes.
- In some regions, SoJos or solo journalists are slowly moving into the mainstream. In others, computer and video gaming are growing more popular as a form of political, social, and artistic expression, and are embraced as a platform for critique, training, and education.
- In some regions—especially in “leapfrog” development countries, new media offer a viable substitute for state-controlled or non-existent traditional media
- The digital divide remains a problem. While physical access to devices and connectivity slowly closes, the digital skills divide persists or widens in some places. In regions where the digital divide has considerably narrowed—including the US and Europe—information overload may be the problem.

Media Literacy as a Catalyst

A public educated about the roles and responsibilities of media and their function in society can offer a powerful reinforcement to independent media. Media literacy and media education, however, are often overlooked components of media development.

- The Internet, satellite television, cell phones, MP3 players, and email have injected more choices into the information landscape, and media literacy programs are means to help audiences to make sense of them and put them to best use.
- Strengthening media literacy (K12 to college and beyond) may further public support for independent media and help commit government officials to more open policies.
- Media literacy includes learning how to create media messages and to utilize new media technologies to foster political, economic and social development.
- Many university programs in developing countries suffer from entrenched faculty, outdated curricula and teaching methods, and offer little practical experience to journalists or students generally.

Research and Independent Evaluations

Donors and implementers have published very few independent evaluations on media development. The academic community has also largely ignored the topic—perhaps due to prevailing ignorance about the field and to the perceived difficulty in accessing relevant data.

- Effective research methods are needed to evaluate media development projects,

document success, assess transferability across regions, and understand causes of failure.

- Rigorous, independent research is needed to provide policy and operational guidance to decision-makers in donor agencies, and to suggest areas where donor collaboration could accelerate progress.
- Examples of needed research include: impact of media development programs on political participation, access to health services, business formation, income distribution and other development indices; comparative analysis of various legal and regulatory systems on media growth and journalistic independence; effects of privatization of state-owned media on public interest programming; factors essential to economic viability of newly established media outlets in transition and post-conflict societies.

A Legally-Enabling Environment

Despite the centrality of the legally-enabling environment, work in this area has been challenging, investment has been episodic, and results have been mixed.

- Donors have encountered numerous obstacles in promoting legal and regulatory reforms. Governments are reluctant to introduce reforms that undermine their control over the media. The process to revise legislation requires time and political capital. Firms that own broadcasting licenses oppose change that could erode their dominance.
- Even when reforms occur, poor implementation often limits the impact.

- The media law profession is weak in many countries.
- Donors and implementers lack access to information on media laws, relevant NGOs, and expert assistance.
- Pooled resources for the legal defense of journalists and media organizations is needed, as is a global network of media defense lawyers.
- New media may lower costs and offer opportunities to serve niche audiences as part of bundled or pay services.
- Private investment plays a critical role in the development of satellite and conventional broadcasting, newspapers and periodicals, internet and cellular services, yet connections to public investment are often absent or problematic.
- Commercial constraints can limit media freedom as acutely as political interference.

Patient Capital for Sustainability

Most media start-ups in emerging or transitional societies require more than short-term support to achieve sustainability, often several stages of coordinated capital infusion.

- Most donor funding, however, is short-term and uncoordinated.
- There is no one-size-fits-all formula for sustainability.
- Not every worthwhile media project can achieve sustainability.
- Development of business skills alongside journalistic training is an essential part of a sustainability strategy.
- Advertising support is only one model for reaching sustainability. Weak economies, unfavorable tax laws and government interference may impede viability from advertising revenue.
- Aggregation of audiences across markets may be one way to increase advertising potential, but many regions lack mechanism for such strategies.

Cross-Cultural Capacity-Building

Capacity building and training should incorporate non-traditional media, news products and producers, and seek non-news participants, especially in conflict regions.

- Insufficient training is available for local watchdog groups that monitor press freedom and provide protection for journalists.
- Although many donors are interested in niches such as investigative, health or business reporting, the need for general reporting and basic skills remains central.
- Public service values and ethics training are more effective when combined with practical and technical training, rather than taught separately.
- Media with a well-defined political viewpoints and narrowcasters who validate group prejudices are increasingly popular in many regions.
- Initiatives are needed that educate

journalists on covering stories that may incite religious, ethnic, or national conflict.

- Music and talk show hosts, among others, who have provided the greatest opportunities for hate speech in some situations, should be included in training on conflict reporting.

Maintaining Integrity and Credibility

Conscious strategies are needed to enhance the credibility of donors and media development professionals in the eyes of the served communities and countries.

- Media assistance programs often encounter doubts and outright hostility in recipient countries. Absence of transparency on the identity and purposes of donors makes gaining trust and credibility more difficult.
- Media development assistance is often confused with propaganda or efforts to sway public opinion to favor a particular political outcome.
- There is a risk that media development becomes synonymous with political warfare.
- Media donors should do all they can to support the independence of local partners and media voices and avoid political bias that undermines long-term credibility.

More Effectiveness, Less Redundancy

Coordination and greater efficiency are needed among government and private donors to enhance effectiveness.

- Agreement on information reporting standards and greater transparency on goals and grant recipients can reduce redundancy and increase cooperation and effectiveness.
- Greater disclosure of strategic plans and regional concentrations can offer better targeting of resources and accurate evaluation.

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