

# Government Communication Capacity and Media Freedom

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## Question

*Is there a relationship between government communications capacity and media freedom?*

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# 1. Summary

The aim of this rapid literature review is to examine the relationship between government communication services and media freedom. However, this relationship receives little mention in the literature on media development and media freedom. Hence, it is very difficult to reach a consensus on the relationship between government communication services and media freedom due to the lack of evidence.

Although there is a well-developed literature on media support as part of international development assistance, it makes little reference to the role of government communication services in supporting the development of a free and independent media. Instead, the literature emphasises the watchdog role of the media in terms of fostering transparency and accountability (Deane, 2015). There is limited mention of the relationship between governments and media in the readings on the media ecosystem and open government initiatives supported by the OECD (OECD, 2016a; Ubaldi & Perez, 2018). The literature in this review comprises a mix of academic literature and policy reports produced by the OECD, the World Bank, Centre for Independent Media Assistance (CIMA) and BBC Media Action.

The media eco-system includes government, public and private sector media, social media companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens (OECD, 2017). This rapid literature review will focus on the influence of government communication on the government-media relationship. It does not encompass other avenues through which government is able to affect the media environment such as legislation, public policy and political culture. The role of the public media is briefly considered.

This rapid literature review was able to find only one study, which examined the role of the government communication on media as part of a broader inquiry on the influence of government communication and public trust in the government of the United States (US) (Liu, Horsley, & Yang, 2012). Liu et al. (2012) found that there was a positive relationship between media interaction and good coverage of the US government. This finding suggests that governments may have an incentive to foster good relations with the media.

The other main findings of the review are summarised below:

- Governments require a positive relationship with the media in order to communicate with the public and build legitimacy for their decisions (OECD, 2016);
- Media often rely on official government information, especially during war and conflict, and therefore need friendly relations with government to gain access to information (Yuksel, 2013);
- The engagement between elites, the media and the public is complex and is unlikely to be controlled or dominated by any particular set of actors (Yuksel, 2013);
- In some countries that were transitioning to democracy, development assistance for media has helped to foster media which is critical of the government, resulting in a tense relationship between media and government (Rub, 1996);
- Donors support media development through development programmes that support open government or good governance. However, media support is a small component of these programmes (OECD, 2016; Deane, 2015);
- Public media can be used as a medium for disseminating government propaganda (Thabane, n.d.); and

- Social media provides government with a direct communication channel to the public, thus bypassing the traditional media (Graham, 2014).

Case studies from Zimbabwe, South Africa, India and Mexico indicate that governments use their advertising budgets to undermine media independence and discourage critical reporting (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013; Maqeda & Makombe, 2013; Semetko & Wahdwa, 2013). The literature does not highlight specific issues that relate to gender or disability.

## 2. The relationship between the government and the media

### The media ecosystem

The relationship between government communication services and the media is touched on in the literature on the media ecosystem. The media ecosystem includes government, public and private sector media, social media companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and citizens (OECD, 2017). A well-functioning media ecosystem supports democracy by fostering transparency, accountability and participation (OECD, 2016a). The government is able to influence the media ecosystem through legislation, its own institutional communication, media policies relating to access to information (ATI) and the public sector media (OECD, 2016a). News media acquire most of their information from official government sources and therefore need to have a good relationship with the government (Yuksel, 2013). During wars or conflict, the media rely mostly on official sources of information and consequently there is coherence between media reports and the government position.

The media have a public service function to inform people about matters relating to the government (Deane, 2015). Moreover, governments need to build legitimacy and this requires that they justify their actions to the public through communication that involves the media. “They need to cultivate a positive image to get an advantage against the opponents, win public approval and gain political power by using the media” (Yuksel, 2013, p. 60). Nearly all political parties and government agencies employ news managers and spin doctors who are responsible for maximising favourable views of government policy or actions, while minimising negative aspects. However, research conducted by the OECD finds that only 40% of citizens trust their governments (OECD, 2016a). The OECD supports open governance and open data initiatives to encourage accountability. Moreover, open government principles help to build trust between the government and the citizens. The media acts as an intermediary that mediates the relationship between the government and citizens (OECD, 2016b).

### Theories of government-media relations

The relationship between government and the media varies significantly in different political and media systems. Yuksel (2013) discusses five theories that explain the relationship between government and the media:

- *Hegemony* – media is an apparatus used by the state to produce hegemony. The media is one of several institutions that are part of a process to create a worldview compatible with existing structures of power in society. Hegemony theory believes that government officials control the flow of information to the public so that it does not stray beyond narrow ideological boundaries. Consequently, information is framed by the interests of a dominant group in society;

- *The propaganda model* – in this model factors such as ownership of media, dependence on advertising revenue and heavy reliance on official sources of information enable elites to manage news and marginalise dissent. The views of government and other elite groups therefore dominate the public discourse and reproduce existing structures of power;
- *The indexing approach* – argues that when there is consensus between elites on certain issues, then media coverage supports and promotes government policy. However, if there is a lack of consensus among elites and division within the government, then the media is free to cover a range of perspectives;
- *The framing model* – emphasises the role of framing. Framing involves the selection of certain aspects of perceived reality and makes them more salient in the communication in order to promote a particular definition of the problem, causal interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation. “Framing is highly critical for government officials and the media to exercise political influence over each other and over the public because the way you define a problem promotes particular perceptions, interpretations, evaluations and solutions that benefit one side while obscuring the other side” (Yuksel, 2013, p.66); and
- *The cascade model* – assumes that political actors, the media and the public mutually influence and interact with each other at different levels. The interaction among elites, the media and the public is complex and cannot be controlled or dominated by one set of actors. Citizens perceive politics through the media but politicians rely on the media to gauge the perceptions of citizens.

Reliance on official sources of information from the government often results in a framing that is favourable to the government (Liu et al, 2012; Yuksel, 2013). Hence, media are passive rather than adversarial especially in times of war or international conflict and they are criticised for being susceptible to manipulation by powerful groups. However, the cascade model suggests that there are cases when media can deviate from dominant frames and play a more active role (Yuksel, 2013). The hegemony, propaganda model and indexing approaches have limitations. These models were developed in the pre-Cold War era and have not been adapted to more recent trends in the international environment.

### 3. Development assistance for media

During political transitions governments request assistance for improving government communication, opening the media sector and reforming state broadcasters (Benquista, 2019). Open government initiatives, such as those sponsored by the OECD in countries which are transitioning to democracy, focus on the interaction between governments and media (Benquista, 2019). Development Assistance Committee (DAC) donors spent USD 80-90 million per year to promote media freedom from 2010 to 2015 (Benquista, 2019). However, an improvement in the variety and quality of media that became more independent and critical resulted in communication with government offices becoming more difficult in countries that were transitioning to democracy (Rub, 1996).

The literature highlights two broad programmes, which entail support for developing an independent media: open government initiatives sponsored by the OECD and good governance programmes funded by several donors.

## Open government

The OECD defines open government as “a culture of governance based on innovative and sustainable public policies and practices inspired by the principles of transparency, accountability, and participation that fosters democracy and inclusive growth” (OECD, 2016b, p. 1). The OECD supports open government data initiatives that encourage information sharing (Ubaldi & Perez, 2018). The OECD Open Government Reviews highlight the importance of improving participation mechanisms to help strengthen trust in government and build social cohesion. Institutional communication by government should disseminate information and create support for public policies and reforms (Ubaldi & Perez, 2018).

## Good governance

Donor programmes for building good governance have generally neglected integrating media and communication issues into research or strategic plans for good governance (Nelson & Sus-Man-Pena, 2017). The role of media in governance is intertwined with debates on the effectiveness of media in terms of promoting good governance as well as the values that underpin media freedom (BBC Media Action, 2017; Deane, 2015). The debate between the effectiveness of the media on governance relates to the tension between the efficiency and stability of government. Open liberal media systems are accused of undermining the stability of government, in some cases. Very few donors have departments or specialists working on the role of media in the government system. The role of media and communication in governance received little attention in development research or development think tanks (BBC Media Action, 2017). Donor support for media development has seldom led to co-ordination and there is scope to improve co-ordination in Ghana, Ethiopia, Tunisia, Mongolia, and Jordan (Benequista, 2019). However, the literature on media development acknowledges that country leadership and ownership is essential for building high quality media. In order for independent media to flourish there needs to be consensus on policy matters such as access to information, transparency and respect for diverse views. “This shared understanding can lay a firmer foundation for a culture of truth-telling and fact-driven policymaking, in turn creating the demand for high quality media” (Nelson & Sus-Man-Pena, 2017, p. 21).

Deane (2015) lists four reasons that make it difficult to forge a consensus on the role of media in governance:

- Some developing country governments see support for media as part of an aggressive democracy promotion agenda that they resist. While some Western donors are able to integrate media support into donor strategies relating to accountability, UN actors find it difficult to prioritise media support when domestic country governments reject it;
- Developing country governments rarely request support for the development of a free and plural media. The international development system does not cope well when there is a lack of country ownership of a development strategy;
- There is a lack of evidence on the effectiveness of media support for promoting democracy and governance;
- It is difficult to organise the media to deliver the level of impact that donors desire.

## 4. Government influence on media

### The role of government communication

Public communication is an important government function. Since the 1960s, there has been declining trust in government and increasingly negative media coverage of government. Many media administration scholars suggest that more frequent and better-quality public communication about government performance can improve the relationship between government and citizens as well as government and the media (Liu et al., 2012). However, government communication faces many challenges such as low levels of public trust. Moreover, the media plays a critical watchdog role and is therefore more inclined to focus on government underperformance (Liu et al., 2012).

Public administration scholars argue that effective government communication leads to more favourable media coverage of the government and ultimately greater trust in government among the public (Liu et al, 2012). This rapid literature review was only able to find one study that tests the relationship between government communication capacity and media. Liu et al. (2012) conducted a survey of 2,525 government and business communicators in the United States. The government communicators included government employees or contractors working with local, state or federal level government or quasi government agencies such as public utilities or partnerships in the United States. They were primarily responsible for communicating internally or externally with respect to the policies, decisions or actions undertaken by their Department. One of the hypotheses tested in this study concentrated on testing whether external communication activities were associated with more favourable media coverage. This hypothesis assumed that proactive interaction with news reporters could build strong relationships between government communicators and reporters thus increasing the chance of fair or better coverage for the government. Using regression analysis, the study found that interaction with the media (including news releases, news conferences, media interviews, responding to media enquiries, pitching stories to the media and tracking media clips) had a positive effect on media coverage among the subsample of government communicators. Therefore, the study suggests that media communicators should work more proactively with the media to publicise government programmes, activities, innovations and performance (Liu et al., 2012).

### Public media

In many developing countries, the public media is used as a propaganda tool (Thabane, n.d.). Moreover, government-advertising budgets are used to gain advantage over the media.

### Social media

Social media provides governments with the means to communicate directly with the public without the intervention of editors and reporters from the traditional media who can act as gatekeepers (Graham, 2014). The use of information communication technology (ICT) and social media enables governments to develop a government strategy to communicate directly with members of the public thus bypassing the traditional media (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012). Social media can foster democracy by allowing for greater citizen participation, knowledge of government actions and more opportunities for engagement. This is facilitated by a two-way flow of information (Graham, 2014). The role of social media in the Arab spring

suggested that non-institutional, decentralised communication among citizens can have a positive impact on democracy (Deane, 2015).

## 5. Case studies

There is limited evidence on the relationship between government communication services and media in the literature. However, reviews of specific case study examples of media-government relations may yield some insights.

### Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, there is only one broadcaster, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). After independence, the new government used the public media to strengthen its hold on political power and this was framed as being in the national interest. The government of Zimbabwe also used legislation as a tool to manage the media. The government has maintained a monopoly over broadcasting services (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

The Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications was responsible for government communication. It was headed by a minister and the top civil servant was the Director of Information. The Ministry of Information, Posts and Telecommunications was also responsible for the accreditation of local and international journalists who wished to work in Zimbabwe. The Department of Information and Publicity ran a parallel government communication operation from the President's Office. It was set up in 1980 and its primary function was serving the information and publicity needs of the President and Cabinet. It was headed by a Principal Press Secretary who reported to a Permanent Secretary who in turn reported to a Chief Secretary. The two structures functioned well because there was no opposition and very few alternative channels of communication (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

The media monopoly helped the government to hide information, such as the killing of 20,000 civilians by government soldiers in Matabeleland and Midlands between 1992 and 1997. In 2000, the government's management of information was radically restructured to cope with the new threat of opposition posed by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The Ministry of Information moved from being an independent ministry to the Office of the President where it was combined with the strategic Ministry of State Security, which was also located in the President's Office (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). All ministries were instructed to channel communications to the Department of Information and Publicity. Consequently, government communication was centralised and disciplined. Centralised messages were used to undermine the MDC by portraying it as a puppet of Western powers. Journalists were rewarded for writing partisan stories while those who remained independent were either demoted or dismissed. The directors of several media institutions were dismissed and replaced with government loyalists. The purge was extended to broadcast media and community newspaper groups. The result was that government could directly control information and communication. The editors of veteran newspapers such as The Herald, the Sunday Mail and The Chronicle were removed. As a journalist stated: "Terror tactics were used to flush out senior journalists to replace them with sycophantic greenhorns who were prepared to toe the line" (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013, p. 200). Individuals that previously worked for the Department of Information in the President's Office became heads of television news services. The board and senior management of the ZBC were appointed by the Minister of Information, in consultation with the president. From 2002 to 2004 the government was able to control coverage in the domestic press while foreign journalists from

the BBC and The Guardian were expelled from Zimbabwe and private media houses were shut down (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

The situation improved slightly in 2008 after the Global Political Agreement was signed but the ZANU PF section of the new government (which was affiliated with the old regime) maintained significant influence and control over the output of the public media. After 2008, Zimbabwe's government communication was managed through the Ministry of Media, Information and Publicity (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

## South Africa

South Africa has a booming newspaper industry with 34 daily and 24 weekly publications mostly in English (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). The Daily Sun, a tabloid newspaper, has the highest daily circulation, which has risen from 78,000 in 2002 to 500,000 in 2010. Print media are important in South Africa because they are able to reach large audiences of potential voters. In March 2010, the South African government announced that it would launch a newspaper because it was being misrepresented by independent media (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

Government communication in South Africa is handled by the Government Communication Information Systems (GCIS), which was founded in 1998, based on the recommendations of a Communications Task Group appointed by former President Thabo Mbeki. The GCIS is managed by a Chief Executive Officer although this appointment is politically motivated. The head of the GCIS serves as the government spokesperson and the GCIS executive committee coordinates communication across the government (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). The GCIS has three branches: communication, content management and stakeholder engagement (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). The communication and content management department is responsible for formulating and executing the National Communication Strategy which includes conducting research to assess and advise government on public communication needs. The GCIS stakeholder engagement branch is tasked with providing leadership and strategic advice to provincial and local government communications teams. It provides an interface between national and provincial government communications programmes. The provincial and local liaison directorate is responsible for acting as an interface between the national government and provincial government communication teams. The GCIS has offices in each of the nine provinces, which work closely with provincial governments and in particular the Office of the Premier. This ensures that the message of government is disseminated in a seamless fashion to the public (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). For example, in 1999 the government introduced Thusong Service Centres that provide general information about government services.

Initially the new South African government under the African National Congress (ANC) seemed to have fostered positive government-media relations (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). In May 2001, editors and senior journalists met with the Cabinet to discuss the establishment of a Presidential Press Corps (PPC). The aim of the PPC was to provide easy access for the media to engage with senior government officials and to ensure that the information published by journalists was accurate and up-to-date. However, the process became stymied when the security clearance requirements included questions on the sex lives and bank accounts of journalists. There was concern that government was trying to obtain personal information on journalists for sinister reasons and as such the PPC was not established. In 2001, the government established a Presidential Participation Programme (PPP) to provide a platform for face-to-face interactions with citizens. Prior to the PPP, this involved an *imbizo*, a forum for dialogue between the government and citizens. In 2002, the Cabinet decided that there should

be at least two *imbizos* within a year. During the *imbizo* senior officials from all tiers of government (local, provincial and national) engage with citizens across the country. The deputy president, Cabinet ministers and deputy ministers, premiers, local government representatives, members of executive councils in provinces, mayors and other senior officials participate in the *imbizo*. In 2009, the *imbizos* were replaced by the PPP. Through the PPP, the government indicates that it is in touch with people's concerns and is willing to discuss needs with different stakeholders (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

The South African Government has an advertising budget of ZAR 1.7 billion (USD 220 million), just over half of this budget (52%) is spent on radio and television while the rest is spent on print media. The government uses its financial leverage through advertising to keep journalists in line. In December 2010 a new daily newspaper, the New Age, was launched. The New Age paper was owned by the Gupta group, which had strong ties to the ANC and in particular former president Jacob Zuma. The New Age received a considerable share of government advertising especially from the provincial government of the Free State province (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). Furthermore, the government takes advantage of the financially constrained community media by using the advertising budgets of municipalities to promote the government through community media (Thabane, n.d.).

The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) is the public broadcaster that is financed through a licence fee and advertising as well as a government subsidy (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). Before independence in 1994, the National Party government used the SABC as a propaganda tool. By 2006, there were concerns that the SABC was once again used for propaganda by the ANC government. It had created a blacklist of reporters, analysts and commentators who could not be interviewed because their views were critical of the government (Thabane, n.d.). The High Court ruled that there was manipulation of news at the SABC between 2005 and 2006. The judge criticised the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) for its failure to take action against the SABC (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

There are signs that South Africa is following Zimbabwe's path (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013). The ANC government controls and manipulates the public broadcaster and has threatened to introduce restrictive legislation, such as the Protection of Information Bill. This bill proposes a media tribunal that would punish journalists who publish sensitive information. Furthermore, the standard of government communication has declined and they do not make enough effort to cooperate with the media (Thabane, n.d.). However, the South African government has much better communication with the public than Zimbabwe and appreciates that it has to maintain communication with the public (Maqeda & Makombe, 2013).

## India

The Press Information Bureau under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting is responsible for distributing government information to over 8,400 newspapers and media organisations (Semetko & Wahdwa, 2013). The Press Information Bureau functions as an interface between the government and the media and enables the government to obtain feedback with respect to public opinion. There are 8 regional offices and 34 branch offices connected to the Press Information Bureau (Semetko & Wahdwa, 2013). A citizen charter describes the mission of the organisation as communicating important information from the government of India. The government of India has a large advertising budget which is managed by the Directorate of Audiovisual Publicity. There is a political debate with regard to government advertising in terms of the language used, support for small and regional publications as well as the content of

government advertising. In 2011, the provincial government of Uttar Pradesh was criticised for underspending on commemorative advertising for Dr BR Ambedkar, the father of India's constitution who was from the Dalit caste. Furthermore, the print media have refused to carry government advertising during elections due to concern that advertising would be manipulated to serve the interests of the ruling party (Semetko & Wahdwa, 2013).

The public broadcaster in India, Doordashan, faces stiff competition from a multitude of private television stations as well as social media (Semetko & Wahdwa, 2013). Hence, Doordashan is not as effective as a tool for government communication as it once was. India may thus have less scope for using the public media for propaganda than Zimbabwe or South Africa.

## Mexico

Until the late 1990s, the media was subservient to the government communication strategy of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) government (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013). However, as the PRI government gradually lost support and introduced reforms, the government's control over the media eased. Television has the largest audience and is the main source of information for politics in Mexico. Mexico has two public service television stations (Once TV and Channel 22), but these play a peripheral role in the media landscape as they reach only 2% of the audience. There are 279 daily newspapers but readership is relatively low. Radio has lost its influence and Internet penetration remains relatively low (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013). During the first three years of administration under the new National Action Party (PAN) government of Vincent Fox, which came into power in 2001, government communication was handled by the Social Communication Office. The government advertising budget was decentralised and allocated across different government agencies. In 2006, the government advertising budget was around USD 66.5 million. Fox prioritised freedom of speech and his communication strategy aimed at meeting the demands for information from the media. Moreover, government priorities were clearly communicated to the media (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013).

During the second term of the PAN government under former president Calderon, there was a drastic change in the government's relationship with the media. The government revived its older, hierarchical relationship with the media (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013). The Social Communication Office regained full control of the government advertising budget and the presidency had full control over managing the budget. The Social Communication Office was staffed with young people who had worked on the president's campaign and who had little media experience. A government spokesperson was appointed to serve as a central point of communication. Government communication focused on its achievements in the war against crime. However, the government neglected to publicise some of its other noteworthy achievements such as managing the economy and providing healthcare and education services. Overall, Mexican governments have failed to effectively communicate the presidential message and this is attributed to a tense relationship with the media. The media framed the democratic change in 2001 in a negative light and the PAN government struggled to build new institutions to manage its communication with the media. Consequently, various administrations were unable to connect with the public and build positive perceptions around their achievements (Leycegui & Valenzuela, 2013).

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