



## The Role of the Media – Issues and Challenges – A Review

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### ABSTRACT

This article mainly focus on the Role of Media issues and challenges .Since the 17th century, the role of the press as Fourth Estate and as a forum for public discussion and debate has been recognized. Today, despite the mass media's propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, the notion of the media as watchdog, as guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between governors and the governed remains deeply ingrained. The reality, however, is that the media in new and restored democracy do not always live up to the ideal. They are hobbled by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership, and sometimes, the threat of brute force. State controls are not the only constraints. Serious reporting is difficult to sustain in competitive media markets that put a premium on the shallow and sensational. Moreover, the media are sometimes used as proxies in the battle between rival political groups, in the process sowing divisiveness rather than consensus, hate speech instead of sober debate, and suspicion rather than social trust. In these cases, the media contribute to public cynicism and democratic decay. Still, in many fledgling democracies, the media have been able to assert their role in buttressing and deepening democracy.

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### 1. Introduction

Since the 17th century, the role of the press as Fourth Estate and as a forum for public discussion and debate has been recognized. Today, despite the mass media's propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, the notion of the media as watchdog, as guardian of the public interest, and as a conduit between governors and the governed remains deeply ingrained. The reality, however, is that the media in new and restored democracy do not always live up to the ideal. They are hobbled by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership, and sometimes, the threat of brute force. State controls are not the only constraints. Serious reporting is difficult to sustain in competitive media markets that put a premium on the shallow and sensational. Moreover, the media are sometimes used as proxies in the battle between rival political groups, in the process sowing divisiveness rather than consensus, hate speech instead of sober debate, and suspicion rather than social trust. In these cases, the media contribute to public cynicism and democratic decay. Still, in many fledgling democracies, the media have been able to assert their role in buttressing and deepening democracy.

Investigative reporting, which in some cases has led to the ouster of presidents and the fall of corrupt governments, has made the media an effective and credible watchdog and boosted its credibility among the public. Investigative reporting has also helped accustom officials to an inquisitive press and helped build a culture of openness and disclosure that has made democratically elected governments more accountable. Training for journalists, manuals that arm reporters with research tools, and awards for investigative reporting have helped create a corps of independent investigative journalists in several new and restored democracies. Democracy requires the active participation of citizens. Ideally, the media should keep citizens engaged in the business of governance by informing, educating and mobilising the public. In many new democracies, radio has become the medium of choice, as it is less expensive and more accessible. FM and community radio have been effective instruments for promoting grassroots democracy by airing local issues providing an alternative source of information to official channels, and reflecting ethnic and linguistic diversity. The Internet, too, can play such a role, because of its interactivity, relatively low costs of entry and freedom from state control. The media can also help build peace and social consensus, without which democracy is threatened. The media can provide warring groups mechanisms for mediation, representation and voice so they can settle their differences peacefully. Unfortunately, the media have sometimes fanned the flames of discord by taking sides, reinforcing prejudices, muddling the facts and peddling half-truths.

“Peace journalism,” which is being promoted by various NGOs, endeavours to promote reconciliation through careful reportage that gives voice to all sides of a conflict and resists explanation for violence in terms of innate enmities. Training and the establishment of mechanisms whereby journalists from opposite sides of conflict can interact with the other side, including other journalists representing divergent views, have helped propagate peace journalism. The media can play a positive role in democracy only if there is an enabling environment that allows them to do so. They need the requisite skills for the kind of in-depth reporting that a new democracy requires. There should also be mechanisms to ensure they are held accountable to the public and that ethical and professional standards are upheld. Media independence is guaranteed if media organizations are financially viable, free from intervention of media owners and the state, and operate in a competitive environment. The media should also be accessible to as wide a segment of society as possible. Efforts to help the media should be directed toward: the protection of press rights, enhancing media accountability, building media capacity and democratising media access.

The mass media are often referred to as the fourth branch of government because of the power they wield and the oversight function they exercise. The media’s key role in democratic governance has been recognized since the late 17th century, and remains a fundamental principle of modern-day democratic theory and practice. This paper examines the complex and multi-dimensional linkages among the media, democracy, good governance and peaceful development. The media shape public opinion, but they are in turn influenced and manipulated by different interest groups in society. The media can promote democracy by among other things, educating voters, protecting human rights, promoting tolerance among various social groups, and ensuring that governments are transparent and accountable. The media, however, can play antidemocratic roles as well. They can sow fear, division and violence. Instead of promoting democracy, they can contribute to democratic decay. The paper explains the constraints that hobble the media’s ability to play a positive role in new democracies. Monopolistic ownership and stringent government controls are among those constraints. But the market – and the race among media firms for audience and market share – can degrade the quality of media reporting as well. In addition, unethical journalistic practices and the use of media organizations by various vested and sometimes, xenophobic, interests contribute to the media’s inability to fulfil their democratic function. The paper looks at the variety of ways in which the various media have been used to support democracy and development. The media, for example, have exposed malfeasance in high office, resulting in the resignation or toppling of heads of state and in the enactment of governance reforms. In addition, in many new and restored democracies, the media have contributed to public education and enlightenment, reconciliation among warring social groups, and to initiating much-needed political and social reforms. The paper ends with a list of recommendations that will help create an enabling environment for the media and ensure that they make a positive contribution to democratic development.

## 2. The Media’s Role In A Democracy

Democracy is impossible without a free press. This is a precept that is deeply ingrained in democratic theory and practice. As early as the 17th century, Enlightenment theorists had argued that publicity and openness provide the best protection against tyranny and the excesses of arbitrary rule. In the early 1700s, the French political philosopher Montesquieu, raging against the secret accusations delivered by Palace courtiers to the French King, prescribed publicity as the cure for the abuse of power. English and American thinkers later in that century would agree with Montesquieu, recognizing the importance of the press in making officials aware of the public’s discontents and allowing governments to rectify their errors. Since then, the press has been widely proclaimed as the “Fourth Estate,” a coequal branch of government that provides the check and balance without which governments cannot be effective. For this reason, democrats through the centuries have tended to take the Enlightenment’s instrumentalist view of the press. Thomas Jefferson, for all his bitterness against journalistic criticism celebrated the press, arguing that only through the exchange of information and opinion through the press would the truth emerge. Thus the famous Jeffersonian declaration: “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate to prefer the latter.” Modern-day democrats are as hyperbolic in their praise of the press. Despite the present-day mass media’s propensity for sleaze, sensationalism and superficiality, they are still seen as essential democratic tools. Contemporary democratic theory appreciates the media’s role in ensuring governments are held accountable. In both new and old democracies, the notion of the media as watchdog and not merely a passive recorder of events is widely accepted. Governments, it is argued, cannot be held accountable if citizens are ill informed about the actions of officials and institutions. The watchdog press is guardian of the public interest, warning citizens against those who are doing them harm. A fearless and effective watchdog is critical in fledgling democracies where institutions are weak and pummeled by

political pressure. When legislatures, judiciaries and other oversight bodies are powerless against the mighty or are themselves corruptible, the media are often left as the only check against the abuse of power. This requires that they play a heroic role, exposing the excesses of presidents, prime ministers, legislators and magistrates despite the risks. The media also serve as a conduit between governors and the governed and as an arena for public debate that leads to more intelligent policy- and decision-making. Indeed, the Enlightenment tradition of the press as public forum remains strong. The press, wrote U.S. television journalist Bill Moyers in the early 1990s, should draw citizens to the public square and “provide a culture of community conversation by activating inquiry on serious public issues.”<sup>2</sup> In new democracies, the expectation is that the media would help build a civic culture and a tradition of discussion and debate which was not possible during the period of authoritarian rule. Not just journalists, but eminent contemporary thinkers like Nobel laureate Amartya Sen ascribe to the press the same cleansing powers that Enlightenment philosophers had envisioned. Sen outlined the need for “transparency guarantees” such as a free press and the free flow of information. Information and critical public discussion, he said, are “an inescapably important requirement of good public policy.” These guarantees, he wrote, “have a clear instrumental role in preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhanded dealings.” Sen sees the media as a watchdog not just against corruption but also against disaster. “There has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy,” he said. “A free press and the practice of democracy contribute greatly to bringing out information that can have an enormous impact on policies for famine prevention... a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threatened by famine could have.”<sup>3</sup> Since the late 1990s, donor countries and multilateral organizations have also been preaching the virtues of a free press not just in ensuring good and accountable governance but also as a tool for poverty reduction, popular empowerment and national reconciliation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) says that addressing poverty requires not just a transfer of economic resources to the needy but also making information available to the poor so that they can participate more meaningfully in political and social life.<sup>4</sup> After all, the poor cannot assert their rights if they don't know what these are. If they are unaware of the laws and procedures for availing themselves of their entitlements or the mechanisms they can use to remedy their deprivations, they will always remain poor. Democracy cannot take root if the poor and powerless are kept out of the public sphere. The argument is that effective media are the key as they can provide the information poor people need to take part in public life. Ideally, the media should provide voice to those marginalized because of poverty, gender, or ethnic or religious affiliation. By giving these groups a place in the media, their views – and their afflictions – become part of mainstream public debate and hopefully contribute to a social consensus that the injustices against them ought to be redressed. In this way, the media also contribute to the easing of social conflicts and to promoting reconciliation among divergent social groups. All these are extrapolations on the media's role as virtual town hall or public square: by providing information and acting as a forum for public debate, the media play a catalytic role, making reforms possible through the democratic process and in the end strengthening democratic institutions and making possible public participation, without which democracy is mere sham.

### 3. Constraints on the Media

The reality, however, is that the media in new and restored democracies are not always up to the task. For sure, democracy has been a boon to the press. New constitutions are written that provide guarantees of press freedom and the right to information, allowing journalists to report on areas that were previously taboo. In addition, democratically elected legislatures have enacted laws that allow both journalists and ordinary citizens much more access to information on government policy and the actions of politicians than in the past.

Today, in most countries that have undergone a democratic transition since the 1980s, the press is an important player on the political stage. Journalists are often feared by politicians because they have succeeded in uncovering corruption, the abuse of power and assorted malfeasance. They are also relentlessly wooed because a bad press can mean the end of a political career. Policies have been changed, reforms initiated and corrupt officials – including presidents and prime ministers – ousted partly because of media exposés. In many new democracies, an adversarial press is part of the political process and it is hard to imagine how governments would function without it.

Yet, despite constitutional guarantees and in many cases, also wide public support, the media in fledgling democracies have been hobbled by stringent laws, monopolistic ownership and sometimes, brute force. In 2002, 20 journalists were killed because of their work and 136 were in prison because authorities were displeased with their reporting. Many of these victims were reporting in new democracies.

State controls are not the only constraints. Serious reporting is difficult to sustain in media markets that put a premium on the shallow and the sensational. A media explosion often follows the fall of dictatorships. After Ferdinand Marcos was toppled in 1986, for example, scores of new newspapers and radio stations sprang up in the Philippines, as citizens basked in the novelty of a free press. In Indonesia, hundreds of new newspapers opened after the 32-year reign of President Soeharto ended in 1998. Indonesians called it the “euphoria press.” Euphoria is a wonderful thing, but it does not always give birth to good journalism. The same is the case for Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, where there was a lack of skilled journalists to staff the news organisations created by the media boom. The boom also results in intense competition, which often means racing for the headlines and sacrificing substance and depth.

The competition for the market has meant that the media in most new democracies have succumbed to the global trend of “dumbing down” the news. This is especially the case in television, where reports on crime and entertainment drown out the more important news of the day. The stress on glitzy effects and bite-size news reports. Indeed, media owners have not been shy about extracting such private benefits. In the new democracies, media magnates have used their newspapers or broadcast stations to promote their business interests, cut down their rivals, and in other ways advance their political or business agenda. State ownership, meanwhile, allows government functionaries to clamp down on critical reporting and recalcitrant reporters and enables the government to propagate its unchallenged views among the people. The interests of media owners often determine media content and allow the media to be manipulated by vested interests.

#### 4. Conclusion

In many new democracies, the mass media are challenged by market forces, illiberal states, and in some cases, a hostile or apathetic citizenry. Yet despite these, news organizations and media NGOs in many countries have managed to assert the media’s role in buttressing and deepening democracy. The following sections describe some of the ways in which media groups have lived up to the democratic ideal of the press as watchdog, public forum, catalyst of social reform, and builder of peace and consensus.

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