

## Concept Note

### THE ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE GOVERNANCE AGENDA: WATCH-DOG, AGENDA-SETTER, AND GATE-KEEPERS.

Workshop from 29<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> May 2008

John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge MA 02138

The World Bank Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at KSG are co-sponsoring a Harvard University Workshop on "*The Role of the News Media in the Governance Agenda: Watch-dog, Agenda-Setter, and Gatekeepers.*" The event will be held from 9am Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May until midday Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008 at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

The Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP) is a global program at the World Bank with two complementary goals. The first is to promote the use of communication to help governance reform programs work under real world conditions. The second is to promote the building of democratic public spheres – characterized by plural and independent media systems, free flows of information, and free debate and discussion – as permanent institutional mechanisms for securing good governance, democracy, and accountability. To explore these issues, CommGAP has proposed this dialogue, reflecting the program's commitment to thinking through these issues in conjunction with the Joan Shorenstein Center at Harvard.

#### Purpose:

- 1) *Generating Content.* A summative look at the state of research/discourse on the relationship between the mass media and the broader governance agenda; debate/discussions to be based on rigorous evidence and specially commissioned research. The purpose of the workshop is to compare the role of the mass media in strengthening core dimensions of democratic governance. (See Conceptual Framework.)
- 2) *Developing Advocacy.* Engaging with policymakers and other actors in the development field; seizing the moment to highlight the importance/role of the mass media within the broader governance agenda.

#### Desired Outcomes:

- 1) Further research avenues: academia, think tanks, development organizations
- 2) Global advocacy moment:
  - a. Influence on "the global conversation" – bringing the public sphere and the mass media into the discussion on development
  - b. Influence on donors' and developing countries' conceptualization of the governance agenda
  - c. Influence on field operations: program design/outputs/outcomes
- 3) Edited report (provisional title to be finalized at later date): "*The Role of the News Media in the Governance Agenda*"

## Conceptual Framework:

### 1) *The Public Sphere: Working Definition and Constitutive Elements*

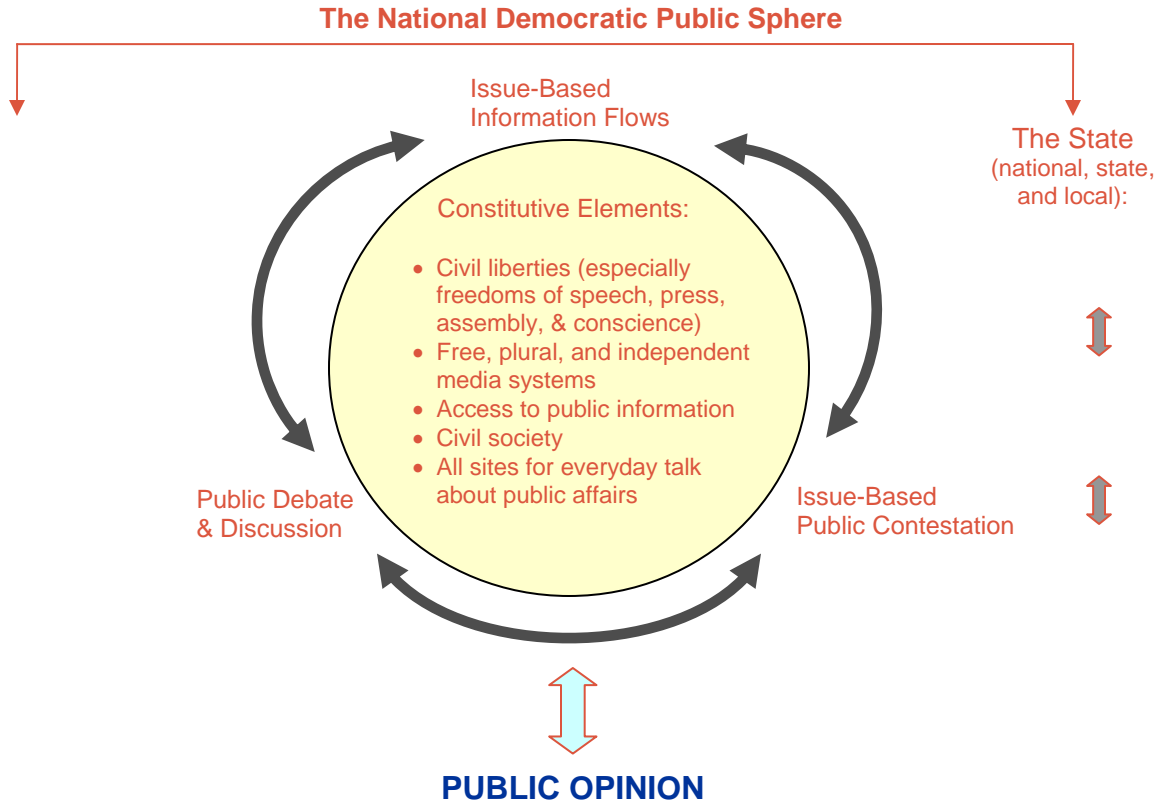
The democratic public sphere is an idea with a pedigree both ancient and impeccable. At the heart of the public sphere is the *agora*, the main political, civic, religious, and commercial center of the ancient Greek city. It was here that citizens traded goods, information, concepts, and ideas in order to better their situations and impact the powers that governed them, thus improving the quality of their own lives. In political philosophy, the agora has come to be known variously as the public arena, the public realm, the public domain or the public sphere.

As a normative concept, and for the purposes of this discussion, the democratic public sphere represents that space between the state and the household where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to deliberate upon common concerns, and to cooperate and collaborate on solutions to social problems. Securing the democratic integrity of the public sphere requires the unrestricted flow of information and the guarantee of basic civil liberties, including free expression, argument, debate and discussion. Such a domain helps to promote accountable governance which is responsive to human needs. Informed citizens can match their policy preferences against the political choices available in an election. Truly inclusive, participatory democratic governance is thus the best security against misrule.

Based on this normative interpretation, the following characteristics of a democratic public sphere emerge (visually depicted in the graphic below):

- Constitutionally or legally guaranteed civil liberties and political rights, especially freedom of expression, opinion, information, and assembly, as well as open and transparent governance.
- A pluralistic communications system where the mass media are independent from state control, official censorship, and legal restrictions, reflecting diverse perspectives, social sectors, interests, and political persuasions.
- A rich and robust civil society with multiple organizations and associations facilitating unrestricted deliberation, cooperation, and collaboration on issues of common concern.
- Equal access of all people to the public sphere, enabling opportunities for expression and participation, especially for women, young people, and marginalized sectors of society.

It is reasonable to acknowledge that, measured against these normative criteria, no single country serves as a perfect example of the democratic public sphere. But this holds true for all the other outcomes we seek in the governance agenda, such as responsive and accountable public service providers and meritocratic civil service systems.



2) *The ideal standards for the role of the news media in strengthening democratic governance and human development*

Within the many components of the public sphere, this project proposes to focus upon examining cross-national and case-study empirical evidence to see how far pluralistic and independent news media contribute towards strengthening democratic governance and human development. There are many rival normative standards available for evaluating how well the news media functions as a system, as well as different perceptions about the appropriate roles of journalists and broadcasters. Among these, the most important aspects for democratic governance concern the triple roles of the news media as ‘watch-dogs’, ‘agenda-setters’, and as ‘gate-keepers’.

As ‘*watch-dogs*’, the news media should serve democracy as a check and balance on powerful sectors of society, including leaders in the public and private domains. According to this ideal, the news media should keep a skeptical eye on the powerful, guarding the public interest and protecting it from incompetence, corruption and misinformation. On a routine basis, news coverage of public affairs can help citizens to evaluate the performance of government, for example their record on reducing crime or improving economic growth. Investigative reporting commonly highlights failures in government, especially those arising from cases of bribery, corruption, and malfeasance, from abuse of power, or from incompetent management of public service delivery. Such information can help promote government transparency and accountability, especially by facilitating more informed choices by voters during elections. Crusading journalism can also uncover major problems of corporate governance, such as the Enron case. Public disclosure, while not sufficient by itself to stamp out these problems, is the sunshine which can act as a disinfectant to eradicate cases of corruption, to bring government misconduct to the attention of the electorate and the courts, and to deter others from similar behavior. At the same time, in fragile states emerging from conflict, where there are serious problems in establishing a

peaceful and democratically-elected state, an excessively adversarial role by the news media may undermine government authority and legitimacy.

As an '*agenda-setter*', the news media functions to raise awareness of social problems, especially vital issues such as news reporting of major disasters or crisis which require urgent action. Agenda-setting emphasizes the importance of certain problems in news coverage and thereby calls attention to issues of concern among the general public and government officials. The process also involves framing: journalists trigger familiar interpretive frameworks shaping how we think about social problems and their potential solutions. In this regard, the press should operate like a burglar-alarm, sounding alarm warnings and rousing people to action when major challenges and crisis arise. Coverage of these issues in the news media can inform the general public and government officials, making people more responsive to social needs, humanitarian crisis, and development priorities, both at home and overseas.

Lastly, as '*gate-keepers*', the news media serves as the classical agora where journalists and broadcasters bring together different interests, political parties, and social sectors meet to debate issues of public concern. Balanced coverage among a pluralistic range of independent news media sources is particularly important for encouraging a vital and lively deliberative process representing all political persuasions and viewpoints. This process is most critical in post-conflict states and deeply divided societies, as a way of encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and interaction among diverse communities, reducing the underlying causes of conflict and building the conditions for a lasting peace. The representation of women, the poor, and marginalized groups is also vital, so that all voices are heard in communication processes. Balanced coverage of all political parties and issues is also important in election campaigns, to provide the basis for informed choice among citizens. Where media gate-keepers consistently exclude certain voices or interests, this stifles public debate and reduces the quality of democracy.

### *3) Limits on the roles of journalists*

Despite these democratic ideals, in practice many factors can limit the effectiveness of the news media from serving the broader public interest through these roles. Where the interests of the news media are too closely aligned with the powerful or affluent, the press can fail to be sufficiently independent or critical watchdogs serving the broader public interest. Investigative reporters encounter major problems of scrutinizing decisions where official information is tightly controlled or where press freedom is limited through regulation or state censorship.

In the most extreme cases, methods used for limiting the watch-dog, agenda-setting and gate-keeping roles of the news media include overt official censorship; state monopoly of radio and television channels, or severely-limited competition through oligopolies in commercial ownership; legal restrictions on freedom of expression and publication (such as stringent libel laws and restrictive official secrets acts); the use of outright violence, imprisonment, and intimidation against journalists and broadcasters; and the techniques of propaganda to spread state ideologies. Freedom of expression for investigative journalism can also be restricted by less draconian factors, including requirements for registration or licenses for journalists or newspapers; broadcasting regulations as well as laws governing broadcasting contents; concentration of ownership; and a legal framework governing official secrecy or freedom of information, intellectual property, libel, and taxation. Moreover the journalistic culture may reject the legitimacy of these functions, if it is widely believed that reporters should play a role which is more loyally supportive of autocratic leaders, predominant parties, or affluent business elites.

#### 4) *Constitutive Elements and Connective Tissue*

New initiatives designed to strengthen the roles of the news media also require attention to a broader range of issues beyond journalism. Donors may typically think about the elements of the public sphere individually – such as building an independent media sector, strengthening civil society, or supporting freedom of information legislation. Operationally and conceptually, these are treated as separate programs; in the field, different NGOs may be responsible for the separate pieces of work. Because of this, the connective fiber among these programs remains unrealized in practice, potentially leading to lost synergies, missed opportunities, diminished impact and even negative outcomes.

This phenomenon can be illuminated by examining it in the context of a particular arena of the governance agenda. Take anti-corruption programming, for instance. During anti-corruption program design, the elements of the public sphere are treated separately: for example, passing freedom of information legislation may be an important program component, but is designed and carried out in isolation from other elements of the public sphere. What is missed is the interaction between that legislation and the media sector's capacity to understand and use it, as well as interaction between the legislation and the broader political culture within the country, which may or may not encourage robust debate and criticism of government. Investigative journalism programming may also be a separate part of the anti-corruption agenda, but is generally viewed in isolation from all of the above, not to mention from programs to address the capacity of government ombudsmen/watchdogs to effectively act upon stories of corruption that are broken in the press. By tasking ourselves with scrutinizing the connective tissue between these discrete programs, we begin to grasp the importance of the public sphere as a conceptual framework for the governance agenda.

Hence, we propose that the workshop link its discussion of the news media to specific categories of the governance agenda, focusing on those that would most benefit: Anti-Corruption, State Responsiveness and Accountability, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction.

From these discussions, further avenues of exploration may arise. Examples include:

- development of a diagnostic tool for the health/strength of the mass media in countries, and its precise relation to overall governance conditions
- operational impact on work: incorporating the issues discussed in the workshop into program design/monitoring/evaluation

The workshop will bring together practitioners and scholars, with discussion focused around specially-commissioned papers addressing these issues. Selected draft papers will be revised by the contributors then edited into an integrated publication which will be produced after the meeting.

The event will be held at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, which brings together a range of institutional partners to work with the CommGAP program at the World Bank. Those who will be invited to co-sponsor the event and send representatives to the workshop include the following:

- The Joan Shorenstein Center for the Press, Politics and Public Policy, KSG
- The Roy and Lila Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation, KSG
- The Nieman Foundation for Journalism, Harvard University
- The Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, KSG
- The Center for International Development, Harvard University

## WORKSHOP: THE ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE GOVERNANCE AGENDA

**Meeting schedule:** 9.00am Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> May until noon on Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> May 2008

**Meeting location:** The Malkin Penthouse, the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

**Local residential accommodation:** The Charles Hotel, One Bennett Street, Cambridge, MA, 02138.

**Organization and sponsorship:** the CommGAP Program at the World Bank and the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at KSG.

### Workshop Structure:

#### 1. Framing the Debate (see Conceptual Framework)

##### 1.1 The ideal role of the news media in the public sphere

What are the most appropriate normative standards and the ideal functions of news media systems? In particular, what are the watch-dog, agenda-setting and gate-keeping roles of the news media? How far do these roles contribute to strengthening democratic governance and human development?

##### 1.2 Diagnostic tools and performance indicators

What evidence and what diagnostic tools are available to compare how effectively journalists are performing in their roles as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers in different societies? How are the core components of media freedom monitored and operationalized by alternative quantitative indices, based on 'expert' judgments, and are these measures valid, robust, accurate, and reliable? Do new measures and methodologies need to be developed and additional sources of data gathered? What do the available indices suggest about the functions of the news media, including cross-national comparisons worldwide and also evidence of trends over time? Can the indices be transformed into typologies and classifications for comparing these roles? The aim of this session will be to bring together representatives from some of the main organizations monitoring media freedom and communications systems worldwide to compare practices and evidence. Examples of common indicator include:

- Freedom House: *Survey of Freedom of the Press, 1980-2007*
- Reporters without Borders: *Press Freedom Index, 2000-2007*
- IREX: *Media Sustainability Index*
- CIRI: *Human Rights Index*
- Committee to Protect Journalists: *Attacks on the Press*
- Index on Censorship
- The Pew Research Center for People and the Press: *News Interest Index*
- Nielsen Media Research: audience research
- The Africa Media Barometer
- Media Tenor: Content analysis
- UNESCO/ITU: International statistics on communications and information technologies, including newspapers, radio, television, telephones, and the internet
- Djankov et al. index of state-private media ownership
- Surveys of journalists and media elites
- Cross-national mass surveys: World Values and Global-barometer Surveys

## **2. The role of the news media in agenda-setting: framing development challenges**

### **2.1 State responsiveness to natural crisis and disasters**

One of the classic roles of the news media is to raise awareness of social needs and development challenges. This process involves agenda-setting: emphasizing the importance of certain problems in news headlines and thereby prioritizing issues of concern. The process also involves framing: triggering interpretive frameworks shaping how to think about social problems and their potential solutions. Does this function thereby strengthen government responsiveness to social problems arising from natural crisis and disasters, such as famines, floods and pandemics? This is the well-known claim of the eminent economist Amartya Sen. Under what conditions does the news media succeed, and fail, in their agenda-setting role when covering natural crisis and disasters?

### **2.2 Donor responsiveness to humanitarian crisis and development aid**

This topic focuses upon how far the international news media highlights coverage of natural and manmade humanitarian disasters in developing countries overseas, and how far this process thereby heightens concern in public concern and the responsiveness of donor governments in sponsoring humanitarian aid and technical assistance.

## **3. The role of the news media as a watchdog: encouraging transparency**

### **3.1 Corruption and the watchdog role of the mass media**

'Watchdog' journalism reflects the role of investigative journalism which holds powerful public officials and institutions responsible for their decision and actions and the impact of these on social, economic and political life. Watch-dog journalism should be particularly important when highlighting problems of corruption, malfeasance, cronyism, and scandal in government, thereby raising standards in public life and limiting the abuse of public office. But how active are journalists in reporting these sorts of stories in many developing countries, and does reporting which focuses too aggressively on exposing the personal and private life of public figures thereby contribute towards public cynicism and deter future leaders from dedicating themselves to a career in public service?

### **3.2 Government performance, collective accountability, and the news media**

Does news coverage of government performance contribute towards an informed public? One of the critical roles of journalists is to report how well the government performs in delivering basic public services, such as health care and schooling, as well as providing broader indicators of government effectiveness, such as on economic growth and foreign policy. Through processes of framing and priming, and by providing a wide range of expert evaluations, the news media provide a prism which the public can use to assess public officials and understand public policy debates, promoting government transparency and accountability. But such reporting can be far from the ideal standards for many reasons, even in democracies with high levels of press freedom, for example where reporting fails to engage in substantive policy debates, or where it gives excessively unbalanced and partisan coverage of the government and public policy processes.

#### **4. The role of the news media as gate-keepers in a public forum**

##### **4.1 The structure and functions of the broadcasting industry as a public forum**

Communication policy regulating the structure of the news industry can play a decisive role in determining coverage of governance issues in the public sphere. In particular, the balance of public and commercial broadcasting varies substantially worldwide. Does public service broadcasting continue to retain a distinctive role in providing balanced information about news and public affairs, providing a platform for all interests and viewpoints, in the traditional model established by the British Broadcasting Corporation, or has the diversity of private news channels now available made this redundant? What is the role of community radio, both state-owned and commercial, as a public forum? What is the role of new information and communication technologies in the public sphere, including the Internet and mobile telephony, in widening the diversity of voices in the public sphere?

##### **4.2 Election campaigns, balance, and the mass media**

Does campaign coverage in election campaigns provide a level playing field for parties and candidates from all political persuasions, interests, and social sectors? This issue is particularly important in transitional autocracies and in consolidating democracies where one major party is predominant, and where the opposition parties and reform movements have difficulty in getting their message out to rally popular support.

##### **4.3 Limits on press freedom and regime support**

How far can autocracies strengthen popular support by silencing dissent and manipulating the news? The many ways that autocracies seek to control the media are well documented. What is less clearly established, however, is how far states with restrictive media environments thereby succeed in manipulating public opinion and strengthening their support at home. The cumulative result of years, or even decades, of tight media control in restrictive and isolated states such as Burma and North Korea is usually assumed to have a powerful impact upon citizens. This paper will look at new survey evidence for the effects of limits on press freedom for patterns of regime support.

##### **4.4 Post-conflict reconstruction/fragile states and the mass media**

What is the role of the mass media in post-conflict reconstruction? In the early stages of any negotiated settlement, peace-building and conflict reduction, it is particularly important to have a pluralistic news media which fosters tolerance and open communication through balanced coverage of all sides involved in the conflict. But often this process fails where the news media is highly partisan, especially in societies deeply divided by language in separate communities.

#### **5. Case-studies of the roles of the news media as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers**

How do the roles of journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers in the public sphere vary across and among different world regions? These papers should take up the issues raised in earlier sections of the workshop and then explore them in depth within particular global regions or in selected comparative case studies within each region.

**5.1 Sub-Saharan Africa:** journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers

**5.2 Central and Eastern Europe:** journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers

**5.3 Latin America:** journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers

**5.4 Asia:** journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers

**5.5 Arab States:** journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers

## **6. Plenary: Conclusions, Policy Options, and Recommendations for Future Action**

### **6.1 Policy options strengthening the roles of journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers**

This paper would summarize the key policy options and make recommendations for future action. There are a number of distinct types or levels of intervention.

At the most general level, one of the most important issues concerns the *constitutional and legal guarantees of freedom of expression and publication*, especially following peace-building initiatives and the reconstruction of fragile states, as well as in the deregulation of state broadcasting following the initial transition to democracy.

Establishing an appropriate *legal framework governing communication policies* also plays a vital role in the consolidation of democratic states. This includes the implementation of international treaties and agreements, as well as the establishment of effective legal structures governing broadcasting licenses, concentration of media ownership, rights to information and official government secrecy, content regulation, and media competition. These policies regulate industry-wide standards and determine the funding for public service and private sector broadcasting. The most appropriate governance structure and the financial, editorial and management independence of public service broadcasting is particularly critical.

*Institutional capacity building* is also important for sustainable solutions, such as fostering professional journalism organizations, press councils, independent media networks, and professional awards to strengthen standards and journalistic cultures.

Lastly, at the most specific level, *professional journalism training programs* and individual capacity building efforts are often employed. While important, it remains the case that individual journalists are often limited from playing their roles as effective agenda-setters, watch-dogs and gate-keepers by multiple structural restrictions and institutional disincentives.

Therefore what provisions and interventions reflect best practice in each of these areas? What institutions and agencies have been most engaged? What can be learnt from interventions about the most effective way to promote the roles of the press as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers?

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