

# **THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN DEEPENING DEMOCRACY**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 anti-democratic 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 recommendations that will help create an enabling environment for the media and ensure that they make a positive contribution to democratic development.

## **II. 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, the press has been widely proclaimed as the "Fourth Estate," a co-equal 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 pummelled by political pressure. When legislatures, judiciaries

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Holmes, "Liberal constraints on private power?" in Judith Lichtenberg (ed), *Democracy and the Mass Media*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp. 21-65.

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.

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Moyers, “Overcoming Civic Literacy” in *Media Reader: Perspectives on Mass Media Industries, Effects, and Issues*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen, *Development and Freedom*, New York: Anchor Books, 1999.

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.

### **III. 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.

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<sup>4</sup> "Corruption and Good Governance: Discussion Paper 3," published by the Management Development and Governance Division, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, United Nations Development Programme, 1997.

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.<sup>5</sup>

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

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<sup>5</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, *Attacks on the Press in 2002*. New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 2003.

leaves no time for serious and in-depth discussion of the issues that matter. The result is that public discourse is dumbed down as well, as both officials and citizens respond to the “infotainment” type of news they get.

Moreover, in many newsrooms, even in affluent countries, tight budgets do not allow for the investment in time and resources that solid journalism requires. Even as the media in many countries are a profitable enterprise, media managers would rather put their money on technology and effects rather than on reportage. In addition, journalists often do not have the experience and the training to do the kind of contextualised reporting that a new democracy needs. Even if they did, the pecuniary and political interests of media owners limit the freedom of journalists to conduct exposés.

In many countries, ownership of the media is controlled by a few vested business and political interests. A 2001 study of 97 countries by the World Bank shows that throughout the world, media monopolies dominate. The study says:

“In our sample of 97 countries, only four percent of media enterprises are widely held. Less than two percent have other ownership structures (apart from family or state control), and a mere two percent are employee owned. On average family-controlled newspapers account for 57 percent of our sample, and families control 34 percent of television stations. State ownership is vast. On average the state controls approximately 29 percent of newspapers and 60 percent of television stations. The state owns a huge share – 72 percent – of radio stations. The media industry is therefore owned overwhelmingly by parties most likely to extract private benefits of control.”<sup>6</sup>

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.

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<sup>6</sup> Simeon Djankov, Caralee McLeish, Tatiana Nenova and Andrei Shleifer, “Who Owns the Media?” Draft paper for the *World Bank’s World Development Report* 2001.



In Thailand, for example, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra owns the only independent television network in the country. The rest of the broadcast media is state-owned or controlled, thus enabling the Thaksin government to have a monopoly of the airwaves. Anti-Thaksin journalists and commentators have been removed from the air, so broadcast news is now subservient to the government. The Prime Minister has also sought to silence the vibrant Thai newspapers by putting the squeeze on their advertising (he owns the largest telecommunications company, a major advertiser, and has also banned government ads in critical newspapers) and by initiating an investigation into the assets of newspaper owners. The result: acquiescence, muted criticism and a general hushing of public debate on crucial issues.

In some instances, the media are 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 can be anti-democratic, contributing to cynicism about government and democratic decay. The public loses confidence in the media and in democratic institutions in general. The result is public apathy and democratic breakdown.

#### **IV. GOOD PRACTICES: HOW THE MEDIA HAVE PROMOTED DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE**

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.

##### **A. Investigative Reporting: The Media as Watchdog**

Perhaps the most instructive case is that of Latin America, where it is widely acknowledged that sustained investigative reporting on corruption, human rights violations and other forms of wrongdoing has helped build a culture of accountability in government and strengthened the fledgling democracies of the continent. There, media

exposure, particularly of corruption in high places, has helped bring down governments. The downfall of four presidents – Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil in 1992, Carlos Andres Perez of Venezuela in 1993, Abdala Bucaram of Ecuador in 1997 and Alberto Fujimori in 2000 – was due in large measure to investigative reporting on their complicity in corrupt deals. Such reporting has made the press a credible — and prestigious — institution in the region’s new democracies. Because it has functioned effectively and independently, the media enjoy the public’s support and trust.

In Southeast Asia’s new democracies, sustained reporting on malfeasance in public life has resulted in the ouster of corrupt officials and raised public awareness on the need for reform. In the Philippines, investigative reporting provided evidence that led to impeachment charges being filed against President Joseph Estrada in 2000 and fuelled public outrage against his excesses. Estrada was ousted from office in a popular uprising on the streets of Manila in January 2001. In Thailand, investigative reports unearthed evidence of the shadowy business dealings of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. In Indonesia, the press has uncovered wrongdoing that led to the filing of charges against high officials, including the powerful speaker of Parliament, Akbar Tanjung, in 2001.

This success has come at a great cost. The New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists tallied 117 journalists killed in Latin America from 1988 to 1998.<sup>7</sup> In the Philippines, 36 journalists have been slain since the restoration of democracy in 1986.<sup>8</sup> In Thailand and Indonesia, crusading journalists have been beaten up, threatened and killed. Worldwide, 15 of the 68 murdered journalists in 2001 were slain because of investigative work related to corruption.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the murders have taken place in countries where the rule of law is weak and the judiciary is unable and unwilling to defend press rights. Because the courts are dishonest and inept, the killers seldom get punished. Those who wish the press ill — whether they are officials, drug cartels or insurgent movements involved in illicit trades or the protection of crime — can operate with impunity.

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<sup>7</sup> Joel Simon, “Overview of the Americas,” in *Attacks on the Press 1998*, New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, p. 159.

<sup>8</sup> Ma. Roselle B. Miranda, “Targeting Journalists,” *Philippine Journalism Review*, October 2002, pp. 16-20.

<sup>9</sup> Bettina Peters, “The Media’s Role: Covering or Covering up Corruption?” in Transparency International, *Global Corruption Report 2003*, Berlin: Transparency International, p.48.

It is obvious that at the most basic level, a free press — and investigative reporting — are possible only where journalists enjoy some protection. Fledgling democracies have constitutional and legal provisions to defend the press, but these do not always ensure that the media can report without fear or favour. The rights of journalists must be upheld by an independent judiciary and protected by the rule of law. In Latin America and Southeast Asia, many of those murdered were the victims of small-town bosses able to terrorise communities because weak states cannot enforce the law and provide protection to their citizens, journalists included.

That is why the press often seems caught in a chicken-and-egg situation. Its freedoms are not guaranteed unless other democratic institutions perform their functions well; but these institutions are unable to do so because there is no independent check on their performance, in part because the press is threatened and bullied. It is often up to crusading journalists to break this impasse despite the risks.

In many places, there is no shortage of journalists willing to take on this task. But many have neither the skills nor the training that investigative reporting requires. Moreover, news organizations may not be willing to put in the investment in time, resources for research and the development of reportorial talent that investigative journalism needs.

Investigative reporting also threatens to upset the cosy relationships between media owners and their friends among the upper crust of business and politics. Press proprietors are wary that hard-hitting exposés might turn off advertisers. Given these obstacles, the only way that investigative reports can make any headway in the media free market is to show that they can sell newspapers and news programs and that there is an audience for serious reporting.

The truth is that in many countries, investigative reports do sell. They generate a great deal of public reaction and bring recognition to news organisations. The key is to get newsrooms to initiate and invest in investigations despite the costs and the risks. One way is to convince them of the rewards, in terms of increased audience share, name-brand recognition or professional prestige. Awards for investigative reporting offer one way to encourage this trend.

Other, less tangible benefits are perhaps even more important. Carefully researched, high-impact investigative reports help build the media's credibility and support among the public. The press as an institution is strengthened if journalists have demonstrated that they serve the public interest by uncovering malfeasance and abuse. A credible press is assured of popular backing if it is muzzled or otherwise constrained. Such support may not be forthcoming if journalists squander their freedoms on the superficial and the sensational.

Moreover, by constantly digging for information, by forcing government and the private sector to release documents and by subjecting officials and other powerful individuals to rigorous questioning, investigative journalists expand the boundaries of what is possible to print or air. At the same time, they accustom officials to an inquisitive press. Officials eventually realise that releasing information benefits the government. Without a free flow of official information, journalists will tend to report lies, rumours and speculations, with no one the better for it. It may take time, but officials must be convinced that informed citizens make better citizens, even if in the process government takes a beating in the press. Any government, no matter how corrupt or autocratic, has reform-minded officials and bureaucrats who appreciate the journalists' role and are willing to co-operate with reporters in the release of information. In the long term, the constant give and take between journalists and officials helps develop a culture — and a tradition — of disclosure.

One way to jumpstart investigative journalism is by conducting special training on reporting techniques as well as on reading financial statements, constructing databases and researching on the Internet. Several national and international media groups are now conducting such training programs. Manuals for investigative reporters, including those that provide tips on where appropriate documents can be found and the procedures for accessing them, arm journalists with the tools they need for conducting research.

Independent centres for investigative reporting have been set up in new democracies like the Philippines, Nepal and Bangladesh. These centres produce model investigative reports, train journalists and publish training manuals. Through these efforts, they have succeeded in promoting investigative reporting among journalists and citizens.

In Latin America, Probidad, an NGO based in El Salvador set up a monitored e-mail discussion group called Journalists against Corruption in 2000. This makes possible the exchange of articles, opinions, announcements and resources among Latin American journalists probing corruption. More than 600 journalists have so far signed up. A similar initiative was established by the International Federation of Journalists in Africa, which put up a website offering free information to African journalists reporting on corruption and governance.<sup>10</sup>

## **2. The Press as Information Tool and Forum for Discussion**

A truly democratic society requires citizen participation. If they do their jobs well, the media keep citizens engaged in the business of governance and prompt them to take action. As a tool for information dissemination, the media aid the public in making informed choices, such as whom to vote for and which policies should be endorsed and which, opposed.

Ideally newspapers and public affairs programs on radio and television should inform, educate and engage the public. The media's track record so far in new democracies, however, is uneven. Because of the need to cater to the market or to kowtow to the state, the media often shirk their civic responsibility and contribute to civic illiteracy instead of public enlightenment.

Elections are a key democratic exercise, one where the media can have both positive and negative impacts. As societies become more modernized and the media become ever more pervasive, the influence of traditional patrons, parties and institutions (like churches) on the electoral process is diminished. Instead, candidates and parties make their appeal and propagate their messages through the media. This is one reason why election campaigns in many countries are now much more expensive: The cost of television and newspaper advertising is huge and now accounts for a substantial chunk of campaign costs. Well-funded candidates often have a better chance of being voted into office simply because they can buy air time and newspaper space. In some countries, candidates also bribe journalists and editors who endorse their candidacies in various ways.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Media-oriented campaigns have not necessarily meant more enlightened electorates. As the example of U.S. elections, which are being mimicked by many new democracies, shows, TV-oriented campaigns tend to put more emphasis on sound bites and glamour, rather than substance and depth. Candidates preen before the electorate, whose choices are often determined by how well the contenders project themselves on the screen.

Still, the media in new democracies have contributed to public education on elections. Public-affairs programs on radio and television provide the depth, context and critical analysis that news programs and commercials do not. In addition, in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, TV and radio networks have produced sophisticated public-service announcements enjoining voters to choose wisely and warning them of the consequences of selling their vote. Debates sponsored by media organizations have been organised, enabling candidates who do not have the money to buy air time to articulate their views to a wide audience. The media have likewise given time and space to independent advocates and NGOs campaigning for clean elections and an end to money politics. Despite these, however, moneyed candidates who have favoured access to the media still have the edge. The media playing field, as far as elections go, remains uneven.

In many new democracies, radio has become the medium of choice, taking the place of newspapers in drawing citizens to the town square for discussion and debate. Compared to television, radio is a less expensive and more accessible medium and is especially popular in poor countries where the media infrastructure is not well developed. FM radio with its localised signal can be an instrument for promoting grassroots democracy.

In Nepal, it took five years after the restoration of democracy for the government to give in to demands by civil society and journalists who argued that it was unconstitutional for the government to monopolise control of the airwaves. In 1996, Nepal became the first country in South Asia to license a non-governmental FM station, Radio Sagarmatha 102.4. Today there are 25 FM stations all over the country and many of them are networked for exchanging programmes and news. FM stations in Nepal have emerged as a true alternative source of information to official channels, and because they are local they focus on local issues and reflect Nepal's ethnic and linguistic diversity.

By decentralising communications, Nepal's rural broadcasters have shown that radio can help in giving people the chance to make informed choices and ultimately strengthen the democratic process. Radio Swargadwari in the insurgency-wracked Dang district in western Nepal is such a reliable source of information that it is staple fare for government officials, local citizens and Maoist guerrillas alike.

The Internet, too, has proven to be a much more democratic medium than newspapers or television, allowing a freer exchange of views for a variety of social groups. In many new democracies, civil society groups and NGOs have found the Internet an effective tool for disseminating information and opinion and also for mobilizing for protest actions. In 2000, in the heat of the mass protest against Philippine President Estrada, the Internet was a hive of activity for Filipino activists who mounted “cyber-rallies” and online signature campaigns, mobilizing students, the middle class and also overseas Filipinos who could not participate in protests at home. There are some 7.5 million Filipinos working abroad, and it was through the Web that they kept track of events and took part in social protest.

Elsewhere, the Web has served as a bulletin board for citizens. Interactivity, low costs of entry and relative freedom from state control give the Internet an edge over the other media. In Central and Eastern Europe, NGOs and media organizations have used the Web to educate the public on elections, political parties and candidates. For example, in the local elections held in Romania this year, independent portals like Romania Online and Election.ro, which were set up by Internet Service Providers (ISPs), sometimes jointly with newspapers, provided political news, results of pre-election polls and other election-related information. Some Romanian students even put up their own website, Electoral2000.ro, on which they mounted an interactive political game to get citizens enthused about the elections.<sup>11</sup>

More traditional media like newspapers have also played an educational and informational role, filling the knowledge gap that other social institutions cannot breach. For example, in 2000, the Panamanian daily *La Prensa* designed a six-week educational supplement to its Sunday edition, targeted at first and second grade students. The paper's

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<sup>11</sup> Alex Ulmanu, “Romanian Election Enters Net Battleground,” in *Online Journalism Review*, <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/technology/1017962590.php>.

editors believed that students lacked basic information about their country, so the supplements provided lessons on history, geography and politics. The contents included new information that students could not get in their textbooks, so teachers used the supplements in their classes and the newspaper donated copies to 140 schools. These lessons on citizenship led to a dramatic increase in circulation and advertising, producing healthy profits for a paper that dared to perform its civic function.<sup>12</sup>

Media companies often blame the need to compete in a tight market for their inability to live up to democratic ideals of the press. But recent experience has shown this need not always be the case. The Indonesian newsmagazine *Tempo*, for example, provides a weekly analysis of the news in addition to original reporting on current affairs, proving that good, solid journalism that appeals to readers as citizens sells. *Tempo*, which is one of the most respected and best-selling publications in Indonesia, is seen as a beacon of democracy and has influenced public opinion on issues of governance, human rights and ethnic and religious conflict. Its commercial success has not blunted the edge of its journalism.

### **3. The Media as Peace and Consensus Builder**

Democracy cannot thrive in countries that are in the grip of violence and strife. Ideally, democracy should provide warring groups mechanisms for mediation, representation and voice so that they can settle their differences peacefully. If it is constantly challenged by violence and dissension, the fabric of democracy will become frayed. Unfortunately, this is the case in many new democracies where the removal of state restraints has led to the revival of age-old enmities once held in check by authoritarian governments. The bloody conflicts that erupted in the former Yugoslavia provide dramatic testimony of this reality.

The experience thus far has shown that the media have not played a neutral role in conflict. In many cases, they have fanned the flames of discord by taking sides, reinforcing prejudices, muddling the facts and peddling half-truths. The media have also been criticised for sensationalising violence without explaining the roots of conflict. The media ignore peace-building efforts, critics say, even as they give full coverage to warmongering. In some cases, they have sowed hate speech and encouraged violence. At

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in the World Bank, *World Development Report 2002*, p. 182.



the height of the conflict in Rwanda in the 1990s, a radio station that had been supported by international donors became the mouthpiece of extremists who favoured and encouraged genocide.<sup>13</sup>

Recognising the crucial role that the media play in conflict situations, many NGOs have embarked on training journalists in what is called “peace journalism,” which endeavours to promote reconciliation through careful reportage that gives voice to all sides of a conflict and resists explanations for violence in terms of innate enmities or ancient hatreds. Peace journalism avoids giving undue attention to violence, focusing instead on the impact of war on communities on both sides of the divide and their efforts to bridge their differences.

Peace journalism has been promoted through the training of journalists covering conflict, including journalists who come from the various religious or ethnic groups currently at war. Various NGOs regularly offer courses on peace journalism.

Innovative approaches include efforts by the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in Indonesia, which in 2001 set up in the strife-torn city of Ambon in the Moluccas Islands a media centre where both Moslem and Christian journalists could get together, learn from each other and share resources. Since bloody clashes between Moslems and Christians broke out in Ambon in late 1997, the press became polarized. Moslems, including journalists, were confined to the Moslem quarter of the city and had no access to Christian communities. The same was true of the Christians. This resulted in one-sided reporting and only served to intensify the hatreds in the community. The media centre facilitated information exchanges and made sources from both Christians and Moslems available to journalists of various faiths. It also allowed the journalists to get to know and visit each other, crossing the boundary that had divided the city. These efforts are helping build trust between journalists on one side and government, NGOs, military and police on the other. Such trust, in turn, has helped consolidate public support for the peace process.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Office of Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, “The Enabling Environment for Free and Independent Media: Contribution to Transparent and Accountable Governance,” Occasional Papers Series, January 2002, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> P. Bambang Wisudo, “Broadening Access to Information as a Way of Ending War Journalism,” paper presented in a conference on “Access to Information in Southeast Asia,” held in Hua Hin, Thailand, 4-6 March 2002.

Another innovative effort to bridge differences among various groups was a multi-ethnic reporting team that was organized in Macedonia in 1995. The team consisted of one reporter each from a Macedonian-language daily, an Albanian-language daily, a Turkish language paper and a Macedonian-language radio station. The team did joint interviews and field visits to describe the current situation in Macedonia, showing how all ethnic groups suffered from the economic crisis and how they were battling for survival in extremely hard times.<sup>15</sup>

Community radio is especially helpful in bridging the gap between communities. In Colombia, a group of NGOs and community radio stations formed SIPAZ (Sistema Nacional de Comunicacion para la Paz or National Communication System for Peace), which operates in areas where violence involving guerrillas, the military and drug dealers is particularly intense. SIPAZ encourages the stations in its network to produce and exchange news that will foster peace and tolerance. It also produces a news program that is sent via the Internet to 42 community radio stations and NGO partners throughout Colombia.

SIPAZ does not cover violence and conflict as there is already sufficient coverage of these in the mainstream media. But it reports on the aftermath and the consequences of conflicts and provides the context in which the violence takes place. SIPAZ also tries to articulate the aspirations of communities for peace and development and incorporates local cultural practices into its programs.<sup>16</sup>

Radio for Peace International (RFPI or Radio Paz Internacional), based in Costa Rica, promotes peace journalism on a global scale via short-wave radio and the Internet. RFPI gets its programs from independent producers and media activists from around the world. An independent radio station, it aims to enhance understanding by providing a spectrum of voices to a range of media users who tune in to 24-hour short-wave broadcasts from the RFPI's transmitters in El Rodeo, Costa Rica. RFPI also monitors and documents hate radio and the use of the media by extremist groups.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "How We Survive: A series of Special Reports from Macedonia," in [http://www.media-diversity.org/articles\\_publications/how%20we%20survive.htm](http://www.media-diversity.org/articles_publications/how%20we%20survive.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Angela Castellanos, "SIPAZ: Peace Journalism in Rural Colombia," in [http://www.idrc.ca/reports/read\\_article\\_english.cfm?article\\_num=1029](http://www.idrc.ca/reports/read_article_english.cfm?article_num=1029).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.rfpi.org>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION

THE MEDIA can make full use of their potential to contribute to the consolidation of democracy if their rights are protected. Moreover they need to have the requisite skills for the kind of textured and in-depth reporting that new democracies require. Because the media are powerful, 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 the intervention of media owners and operate in a competitive media environment. Finally, the media's power is enhanced if they have broad reach in, and support from, society. Democracy suffers if large segments of society are inaccessible to the media and therefore excluded from the arena of public debate.

Various initiatives which have contributed to creating an enabling environment that allows the media to be an effective agent for deepening democracy and which strengthen the media as a democratic institution include the following:

**Protection of Journalists.** In many fledgling democracies, the media become the target of reprisal from powerful groups and individuals who benefit from the silence of a muzzled press. Journalists need to be protected by laws that guarantee their rights. In many new democracies, old laws dating back from the authoritarian past impose harsh punishments for libel, restrict access to official information and impose strict licensing requirements for media companies. The repeal of these laws and the enactment of more liberal legislation can have a liberating effect on the media. So will judicial and legal reforms that ensure courts will defend the rights of journalists and punish those guilty of doing them harm.

In many countries, press associations have played an important role in monitoring, protesting and raising public outrage against attacks on journalists. They have helped raise funds for libel defence, provided refuge for journalists in danger of physical attack, and conducted high-level dialogues with officials. In Latin America since the mid-1990s, the media fended off attacks from officials offended by critical reporting by forming national press associations. "When journalists are united in protesting abuses against the press – and willing to cover attacks against their colleagues even when they

come from rival publications, leaders are forced to heed,” wrote Joel Simon of the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ).<sup>18</sup> National press freedom groups in Peru, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, Guatemala and Mexico, together with journalists unions in Paraguay and Ecuador, have been vigilant in documenting and protesting abuses as well as raising a public outcry against them.

At a regional level, the Bangkok-based Southeast Asian Press Alliance (Seapa) has written letters of protest and raised awareness about press rights among officials, journalists and the public in Southeast Asia.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (Misa) monitors attacks against journalists and issues alerts to a network of NGOs whenever press rights are violated.<sup>20</sup>

International groups defending the rights of journalists – such as Reporters sans Frontiers, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Article 19, the International Federation of Journalists and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (Ifex) – provide timely intervention by loudly protesting any violation of press rights and subjecting erring governments to international scrutiny.

**Enhancing Media Accountability.** The media’s credibility as a democratic institution is enhanced if they are accountable to the public, acknowledge their mistakes and ensure that ethical and professional standards are upheld. A sensational and trigger-happy press does not contribute to intelligent discussion and debate and soon loses public support.

In many new democracies, press and broadcast councils composed of media representatives have taken the lead in enforcing ethical standards and codes of conduct. These councils mediate between the public and the media. Some hear grievances against erring news organisations and impose sanctions. The Indonesian Press Council has also held dialogues involving the media, officials and citizen’s groups, some of which have organised their supporters to attack media offices they accuse of unfair reporting. By

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<sup>18</sup> Joel Simon, “Banding Together,” in *Attacks on the Press in 1998*, New York: Committee to Protect Journalists, 1992, p.201.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.seapabkk.org>

<sup>20</sup> See <http://www.misanet.org>

providing aggrieved parties a forum for airing their grievances and by explaining to them how the media work, the Press Council hopes to minimize such attacks.<sup>21</sup>

Press associations can play a role not just in defending journalists but also in raising ethical standards. The Thai Journalists Association has issued warnings to journalists about possible ethical lapses, including receiving gifts from sources. The Alliance of Independent Journalists in Indonesia has launched an “anti-envelop” awareness campaign where journalists wear T-shirts or ribbons saying, “I don’t take envelops,” alluding to the common practice of providing reporters envelopes of cash during press conferences.

Independent media monitors and journalism reviews contribute to media accountability by assessing media performance, exposing unethical practices and inviting the public to a dialogue about the media’s work. Somewhat similar efforts have been undertaken by women’s NGOs in various countries which monitor how the media cover women’s issues. Overall, independent efforts to watch the watchdog have contributed to the media being more responsive to public sensitivities and to be more vigilant against lapses in professional conduct. In turn, a professional press is a more effective watchdog and forum for public debate.

**Building Media Capacity.** In nearly all countries that have undergone a democratic transition since the 1980s, it is widely acknowledged that a major factor that hobbles media development is the lack of skills. Newspapers and broadcast stations liberated from the constraints imposed by dictatorship find that reporting on a democracy requires new skills and fresh talent. Freedom alone does not suffice. Journalists have to be weaned away from reliance on press releases, press conferences and information ministries. They must learn how to write with depth and insight and also be adept in a variety of fields.

Newsroom training in many new democracies is sorely lacking. Sometimes, press institutes, universities and media NGOs pick up the slack. Many donors now fund training programmes, and many initiatives, such as journalist exchanges, have been developed. But these do not suffice. It takes time to develop a highly skilled corps of

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<sup>21</sup> Atmakusumah Astraatmadja, “Indonesia: Press Freedom in a Fledgling Democracy,” in *Watching the Watchdog: Media Self-Regulation in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok: Southeast Asian Press Alliance, 2003, p. 52-57.

journalists that a professional press requires and newsrooms too often abdicate their responsibility to ensure the advancement of reportorial talent within their ranks.

In some countries, the problem is that news organisations remain reliant on state subsidies and so cannot be truly independent. In other cases, it is not the state but wealthy businesspeople who subsidise the media, which end up being mouthpieces for their interests. News organisations must work toward financial viability so they can buy their independence. As a study on the media in Central and Eastern Europe and the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union recommended, news organisations should be given training in financial management as well as assistance in setting up advertising and business departments. Media owners, the study said, “need forums to work out arrangements such as circulation audits, advertising rates and production and distribution networks.”<sup>22</sup>

The Media Development Loan Fund based in Prague gives out loans and assistance to help struggling media companies in new democracies become financially viable. The Fund also arranges for investors who will infuse new capital in these companies and introduces new technologies that will help enhance their viability.

**Democratising Access.** The media can be effective only if they are accessible to a wide section of the population. Otherwise, they only exacerbate the marginalisation of social sectors that have access neither to the media nor to the centres of wealth and power. Efforts to democratise access include subsidising community and local media, especially in poor and remote areas or in places where groups, such as indigenous peoples, have traditionally been at the margins of social life. The Nepal Press Institute, for example, has pioneered in the establishment of community-published wall newspapers, which are mounted in community centres in the remote reaches of that mountainous country. Elsewhere, community radio and small cable TV stations have allowed groups not represented in the national media to have a voice for airing their grievances and aspirations.

Subsidies that enable poor communities to purchase computers and have Internet access or community centres that provide Internet access at minimal cost help reduce the

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<sup>22</sup> Freedom House, “Media Responses to Corruption in Emerging Democracies: Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Ukraine,” p. 10, <http://freedomhouse.org/reports/mediatxt.html>.

gap between sections of the population that have can afford the new technology and those who cannot. Public libraries or reading rooms that allow citizens to read newspapers, especially in places where they cannot afford to buy them, also help make the press more available to a wider audience. Making the media available to a broad segment of society helps redress long-standing social inequities and gives representation and voice to citizens so they can participate more meaningfully in public life.