International Media Assistance: Experiences and Prospects

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Abstract: As an introduction to this special issue this article deals firstly with defining and clarifying terms and concepts which are used in the context of international media assistance. Secondly, the themes of the different articles in this collection are enumerated: these are broadly the *how to* of media assistance, evaluation and the ongoing debate about proving impact of media assistance project; negotiating the tensions between the state and the media and finally, the fundamental question of why and to what purpose is assistance to the media sector given in the first place. The first two of these themes are developed in slightly more depth. The piece is rounded off with some further reflections on the history both of the idea of media assistance and of the way it has been practiced in recent decades. It finally looks at the ways research in this field may develop in the future.

Keywords: media assistance, ICT, international aid, media and development, media and democratization, impact assessment, evaluation, Western bias

The focus of this issue is international aid to the media sector in developing countries. This special issue brings together diverse contributions from scholars and practitioners who look at the practical and the theoretical aspects of international media assistance; who document some of its recent successes and failures; who critique the ideological underpinning for it; and who bring out the lessons that have been learned and those yet to be addressed.

In this issue we understand support to the media sector as aid to strengthen an independent, diverse and plural media sector, including press, broadcast and new/social media. The main practitioners in this field are international and local NGOs and civil-society organizations, whilst the aid-givers are the main OECD donor-nations plus (increasingly) China. The practical aspects of this assistance usually involve, but are not limited to: training in various aspects of journalism and communications; aid to press, broadcast and ICT infrastructure; strengthening of media businesses (both private and public); support to legal and regulatory aspects; promotion of public media literacy; support for the human rights of journalists and advocacy for freedom of speech.

Justifications for this kind of international aid are usually articulated by donors in terms of promoting accountability, good governance, citizen participation, peace and human rights in developing and transitional countries as part of bilateral and multi-lateral aid spending. Assistance is also given to the media as a vehicle for public education and behavior change but this is not specifically the focus of this issue, despite the fact that donor support to media for the purposes of development often overlaps with, or can be difficult to distinguish from, aiding the media as an end in itself. The media assistance sector has seen millions of aid dollars spent globally, especially since the liberalization of communications that followed the 'democracy wave' which served to liberalize the media in many developing and transitional countries. Arguably this can be dated from the end of the Cold War, of which the 25th anniversary fell recently with the Berlin Wall anniversary of November 2014. Media development is also topical because the post-2015 development goals are being formulated imminently and, as Bill Orme shows in his essay, the media development sector is keen to see the inclusion of at least freedom of expression, if not a free media, as part of these goals.

Media assistance has experienced considerable changes, especially after the failures of some media development programs in the 1990s and 2000s. Two major meta-evaluations summarized the criticisms. "Ten years of media support to the Balkans" (Rhodes, 2007), based on a meta-analysis of 37 project reports, concluded that direct support to independent media was a key factor in helping the citizens of several Balkan countries to rid themselves of authoritarian regimes, but at the same time journalism training – the largest share of media support – had few lasting effects. And the African Media Development Initiative (AMDI) – a research program that assessed key media changes and foreign support to the media in seventeen African countries – found "substantial evidence [for]: non-sustainable and short-term approaches to projects; disconnected programs; unnecessary competition amongst donors; and, consequently wasted investment of donor funds" (AMDI, 2006:15). These criticisms led to the development of a more holistic understanding of media development, which considered that transparent media regulation, financial sustainability and media market transparency were just as important as journalistic professionalism. The media development indicators developed by UNESCO (2008) as "a framework for assessing media development" are one among various tools that emerged in this context. However, based on their specific focus – or bias – media development indicator systems have various limitations (Schneider, 2014). Manyozo's (2012) criticism is that they

> "have only tended to cater for the modernised governance systems, leaving out the traditional systems and their indigenous knowledges. That means that the good governance strand of media development tends to ignore theory of the state formation in the global south, which rests heavily on traditional governance systems" (Manyozo, 2012: 138-139).

The criticism directed at the lack of coordination amongst donors and implementers, as well as the wastage of funds emerged in the process of the Paris Declaration on aid efficiency. This need for coordination also partly led to the

creation of the GFMD (Global Forum for Media Development), which has gathered hundreds of organizations together, working in media assistance.

Furthermore, international media assistance has been and will be criticized because of its implicit political nature. Like other strands of international democracy assistance it is often perceived as Western-biased intervention in political power structures. As Rhodes put it,

> "media assistance [in the Balkans] proved itself an effective way to promote democracy by removing barriers to the enjoyment of fundamental rights to information and expression as protected by international law, and without intervening in political choices themselves. When media support was perceived as being primarily driven by political objectives, it was in danger of being like the problem it sought to alleviate and obscuring the concept of independent media" (Rhodes 2007:36).

The collection of articles presented here can be grouped into a number of over-arching themes which in many ways reflect the current preoccupations of the international media assistance sector:

- The ***'how to' of assisting the media*** in any given country and the lessons to be learned by donors and implementing agencies from experience cut across many of the articles here, but feature in particular in the contributions of Kristina Irion & Tarik Jusic, Mark Nelson, Marek Bekerman and Jan Lublinski and colleagues. The justifications for and the difficulties of promoting public service media (in contexts where public-funded media have acted as mouthpieces for government sometimes for decades) are an especial focus of Bekerman's and Lublinski's field experiences.

- ***Evaluation*** and the ongoing debate about proving impact is the subject of Jessica Nosske-Turner's article, Nicole Stremlau's field report, Michel Leroy's essays, and Sanne van den Berg's thoughts about assessing the impact of a media-assistance project from Tanzania. The issue of evaluation in media assistance is very tricky, as implementers are often asked to demonstrate that they did not only succeed in contributing to more professional journalism or more sustainable media outlets, but also that these journalists and media outlets have themselves an impact on strengthening citizenship or promoting the adoption of desirable behaviors.

- ***Negotiating the tensions between the state and the media*** are a constant theme in this area of development practice, and is the theme taken up particularly by Iginio Gagliardone in his discussion regarding China. The Chinese state's approach to international media assistance is anathema to the Western ideal of free speech and pluralism, but could it not be said that the exercise of China's soft power is akin to the same kind of soft-power that has long been used by the West to exert influence and safeguard commercial relations with developing and transitional countries? Tensions with the

state also arise in almost all the 'how to' articles mentioned above, particularly those discussing how public service media can be promoted through media assistance and if there is ever a case for it where there is clear state intervention in the national broadcasting structure.

- Finally, there is the fundamental question which can be put thus: **why do media assistance, for what purpose and with what theoretical underpinning(s)?** This question is raised in two striking and different ways by Benjamin A. J. Pearson and Daire Higgins, with the former asking whether promoting 'culture' is a good in itself and the latter questioning the Western media assistance model. Marlene Kunst adds to this theoretical debate by addressing the modernization paradigm and by looking at it through the lens of the movement for information and communication technologies for development (ICT4D). We have included this article in this issue because ICTs are increasingly indistinguishable from conventional media technologies and can thus be said to be part and parcel of the world of media development.

Turning, firstly, to the question of the practical 'how to' of assisting the media in any given developing country, we would like to reflect on the fact that, as editors inviting contributions to this special issue, we seem to have attracted fewer theoretical and more practitioner-focused contributions. This may be partly because the area of international media assistance is at once very niche and one which bisects many other disciplines, so that scholarship is widely dispersed across the areas of media studies, development studies, foreign policy studies, public policy and other areas of political science and cultural studies. Many scholars may therefore be simply publishing elsewhere. But this also may be due to international media assistance being an opaque field of development which is difficult to study. Practitioners, not scholars, have much more ready access to the field and intimate knowledge of the daily management of media projects, while scholars are outsiders and often face resource problems, so the results are, perhaps inevitably, more practice-oriented papers. However, these practitioners, who are invariably attached to NGOs or to donor agencies themselves, are bound by tacit rules of confidentiality and professional competition which limit open access to reports and the ground-truth of what is happening to within the bounds of the 'project'. For example, discussion about value for money is very rare, as is any discussion of relative costs and benefits of different kinds of media assistance. These kinds of boundaries limit the free flow of ideas and of open debate within and beyond the sector. There is quite a gulf between practitioners and the academy, and yet the academy could be such a positive neutral space for difficult issues to be brought out, aired and debated.

Several of our contributors have touched on another sensitive area which is the whole question of documenting positive impact which, perhaps understandably, those closest to any project are particularly concerned to do and for which there is

a lot of pressure, especially from donors. For evaluation activities, there are, unfortunately, disproportionally more resources within the sector than there are outside it, which means the sector is vulnerable to accusations of bias in its own favor. For instance, on the African continent, except for a limited number of countries (such as South Africa or Kenya), there are few data available about media audiences. Sometimes data come from assessments implemented in the context of media assistance programmes, in order to 'measure change'. The possibility of a critical and independent perspective on media assistance is also limited because of the absence of resources in African universities to implement much research, pushing African scholars to work as 'consultants' and to produce assessments that are always influenced by the those who have commissioned the work.

The other problem with evaluation is that impacts of media interventions on audiences are perennially difficult things to prove. Although many of our contributors have boldly tackled new issues in new ways, and there are some very useful discussions of lessons-learned in this special issue, we feel that there is much still to be researched in the area of international media assistance and a much more honest and open debate is needed about the successes and failures of the sector.

Certainly there does seem to be a preoccupation with evaluation and the 'proving' of outcomes of media assistance in our sector. As practitioners ourselves we are not immune to the pressures of gathering 'evidence' and documenting positive impacts when asked to evaluate a media assistance project. However, we often wonder why it is not regarded as sufficient simply to be supporting good journalism. Why, for example, when evaluating a community radio station in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is it not enough to say 'yes, thanks to the project, these young volunteers are now professional journalists and local people have a reliable source of vital information'? Is this not development? Is proper journalism not a good in itself? Or do we always have to look for the increased agricultural yield or the number of lives saved, in order to justify the aid dollars spent on media assistance? These questions are touched on by several of our contributors, especially Michel Leroy.

Of course this is not the first time these questions have been posed. Indeed we, as editors, and all our contributors owe an intellectual debt to scholars like Guy Berger and Martin Scott who have teased out these questions and contributed a lot of clear-thinking to our field, and who therefore deserve a mention here. Berger usefully urges us to be clear about what we mean by developing the media in a given situation: he points to the "importance of unbundling meanings of media, and revising the concepts of 'media development' to acknowledge the integration of ICT and media worlds, and also to disaggregate journalism from media, and propose a sub-category of 'journalism development' and related sub-categories like 'journalism mobilization' and 'journalism density'" (Berger, 2010:561). Martin Scott, in his useful book, *Media and Development* (2014) urges "a more considered understanding of the role of media in development", discerning three distinct but interrelated fields within it: Communication for Development (C4D), media development and media representations of development which, he says, are often

confused and conflated but should be examined alongside each other (Scott, 2014:195). He says: "we will need to continue bridging, expanding and transcending the boundaries of existing fields of study if we hope to keep up with the media's ever changing role in development" (Scott, 2014:200).

We also have to underline the input of Krishna Kumar (2009), who frames media assistance in the broader picture of democracy assistance, with a special focus on post-conflict or transitional societies. He draws attention to the fact that, in the media assistance field, "one size does not fit all" and that projects should be tailored according to "the needs and requirements of different categories of nations". He suggests that the international community "should pursue distinct, though overlapping, objectives in these societies". Mention of Kumar brings us to another important strand of debate within media studies which has a strong bearing on media assistance, namely the risk of normative approaches. This is the tendency to use research results to dictate to media (or to implementers) what they should do, and what good journalism is; with more emphasis on what the media should do than on what they actually are and how they are actually used.

This special issue touches on some of these issues and gives valuable insights into the current discussions in the media development field. Looking into the future, research may pursue various different paths. It could analyze the changing patterns of media assistance along with the ways journalism is changing, in the face of digitization and new technologies; comparative research on media systems, journalism cultures and political economy of the media in the developing world could stimulate the debate on more context-sensitive media programs; success factors and limitations of democracy assistance in general and media assistance in particular could be analysed more precisely; comparative studies on specific areas of media assistance could be conceived. These and other issues may arise, in Scott's (2014) words, "to keep up with the media's ever changing role in development".

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