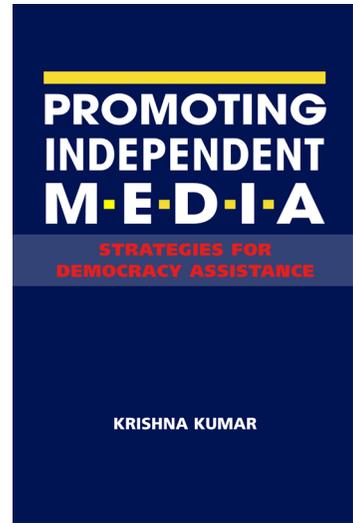


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Promoting Independent Media:
Strategies for
Democracy Assistance

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1

International Media Assistance

A popular government without popular information or means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge for ever will govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

—James Madison

This book examines a relatively new phenomenon in international development: assistance designed to promote robust, independent media in developing and transitional societies. Such assistance is based on an underlying assumption that independent media contributes to the building of democracy and economic development.

In the past, development efforts viewed the media as a tool for achieving specific goals in agriculture, health, business, or education. Now media assistance projects focus on the structure and journalistic practice of the media itself. Such assistance seeks to lay the foundation for the emergence and consolidation of a media sector free of state editorial or financial control, relying on advertising and sales for its survival and growth. Media development efforts strive to achieve the ideal of a “Fourth Estate,” in which the press serves as a complement and balance to the three branches of power—legislative, executive, and judicial. The Fourth Estate, by virtue of its financial and editorial independence, is supposed to hold state authorities accountable by documenting the government’s actions and nurture democracy by encouraging an open but respectful exchange of ideas and opinions.

The international community began providing media assistance starting in the late 1980s. Although precise data are unavailable, multi-lateral and bilateral donor agencies, private foundations, and international civil society organizations have since spent between \$600 million and \$1 billion on media projects.¹ Most of the assistance has gone to the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia. However, Central America and Southern Africa have also received a modest share. There is now a perceptible shift of focus from the former communist bloc in Eastern and Southeastern Europe to other regions in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East that offer fresh challenges.

The substantive focus of media assistance programs has varied depending on the targeted country, the timing, and the donor. The majority of international media projects in the past focused on short-term and long-term training of journalists to improve professional standards and editorial content. Such training projects included consultant visits and publications of books on journalism. Donor governments have provided programmatic support to local media outlets to improve the quality of their news coverage and to increase audience share. Based on the assumption that commercial success is a necessary ingredient in forging independence from government or other vested interests, training initiatives have also imparted management and business skills to media managers.

Other programs have supported organizations, educational institutions, and media associations that promote media freedom and lobby for appropriate legislation and journalists' rights. In addition, donors have given direct financial and technical assistance to struggling media outlets in sensitive political conditions. Finally, European donors have tried to assist state-owned media enterprises in transforming them into genuine public service broadcasters in the tradition of European broadcasters.

Media Assistance and Public Diplomacy

Media development assistance is often confused with public-diplomacy media programs. Such confusion, though understandable, can be misleading. There is an important difference in their overall objectives as well as the strategies employed to achieve them.

Public diplomacy seeks to promote a country's foreign policy interests by informing and influencing the foreign audience. It is an instrument used to generate positive attitudes abroad toward a government's

policies, programs, and social and political institutions. It complements traditional diplomacy because its primary focus is on non-governmental actors. However, the objective of media assistance is to develop and strengthen the indigenous capacity for a free and unfettered flow of news and information, bolstering democratic institutions and culture.

These different objectives usually require different strategies. Media development involves strengthening local journalism and management skills, reforming the legal and regulatory regimes, helping and nourishing civil society organizations that promote a free press, and building an institutional environment that is conducive to the free flow of information and ideas. Public diplomacy media strategies, in comparison, entail broadcasting in foreign languages, providing favorable news stories to foreign media, advertising in newspapers and electronic media, and organizing exchange visits by foreign journalists and media managers. This approach seeks to use the modern media, with its vast audience and influence, to achieve specific foreign policy objectives.

Two recent examples of public-policy initiatives may illuminate this difference. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks against the United States in September 2001, the US State Department funded advertisements in Middle Eastern media portraying the religious freedom enjoyed by Muslim citizens in this country. The purpose of these advertisements was to dispel popular misunderstandings about the American way of life and to emphasize the multiethnic composition of US society. In another case, Voice of America recently launched a program in the Farsi language that provides news and music to an Iranian audience. Its purpose is to promote the cause of democracy among Iranians. By all accounts, the program has a popular following in Iran. Although these two examples represent an effective use of media to further public diplomacy, and could possibly pave the way for the eventual emergence of free media outlets in the region, these efforts cannot be construed as independent media development.

When media assistance is primarily used as a tool of public diplomacy, it can sometimes be self-defeating. Blurring the distinction between the two endeavors creates false expectations in donor countries and genuine apprehensions in recipient nations. US policy-makers, for example, would expect and demand that media projects promote a better understanding of our policies abroad, and evaluate the success and failure of such projects accordingly. They would also expect the media outlets benefiting from assistance to behave like a

friend and not a critic and would be naturally disappointed when this did not happen.²

In recipient countries, merging media assistance with public diplomacy plays into skeptical attitudes about donor intentions. Government officials, political leaders, opinion makers, and academics are likely to resist, if not reject, media assistance because they might view it as a foreign effort to buy influence and manipulate their media sector. Given media assistance's roots in public diplomacy—such as broadcasts from Radio Free Europe and Voice of America to Eastern Europe and Eurasia—genuine apprehensions about US (or other foreign states') intentions exist in many parts of the world. Such apprehensions were epitomized by a remark made by President Vladimir Putin, who while discussing media issues with Russian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) indicated that the purpose of media assistance was to further the interests of Western powers. To prevent such misconceptions that may undermine the success of media assistance, it is crucial to treat media development as distinct from public diplomacy.

Though they are separate tasks, media development and public diplomacy programs can still complement and reinforce one other. Often programs to develop indigenous media help public diplomacy efforts, and many public diplomacy interventions serve to promote independent media. The growth of independent media outlets can create space for public diplomacy. The Serbian case study in this book provides an excellent example. Independent media outlets nurtured by the international community enabled Western states to communicate their message directly to the Serbian public. Moreover, there are plenty of examples of public diplomacy contributing to the evolution of independent media. The former United States Information Service (which is now merged with the State Department) used to provide travel grants to journalists in developing countries to visit the United States. Such programs not only improved journalists' understanding and appreciation of US democratic institutions but also exposed them to the norms and workings of a free press. On their return, many of these journalists worked to promote greater freedom in their own societies.³

Growing Interest in Media Assistance

Several factors have contributed to the growing interest in media assistance. First, when a wave of democratic reform swept Africa,

Asia, and Latin America in the late 1980s, the international donor community started developing innovative programs for democracy promotion.

Such programs attempted to promote the development of civil society, economic and political decentralization, free and fair elections, and the rule of law. While pursuing these programs, donors realized that an independent media was a crucial element in building a functioning democratic system. The success of democratization efforts often depended on a free and unfettered flow of information and ideas. Elections could not be free or fair if the media remained under the manipulative control of a ruling party or government ministry. Civil society organizations could not thrive in the political arena if their voices never reached the public. The rule of law could not be built if citizens were denied the freedom to read, speak, and write as they wished. As a result of this awareness, the international community began to explore media assistance as an element of democratization efforts. The first international media assistance programs in the 1980s were relatively modest and largely focused on Latin American countries.

A major impetus for media development came as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and its hegemony over East European and Central Asian nations. In most of these countries, the underground press had played an important role in undermining authoritarian regimes. These underground outlets helped to strip away the legitimacy of communist rule by exposing its corrupt and dictatorial methods, developing informal communication networks, and enabling dissenting intellectuals and political leaders to reach a larger audience. There was a universal yearning for freedom of expression in these countries, and dissident leaders, social activists, writers, and academics established their own media outlets that reflected their views and aspirations. In Russia itself, *perestroika* and *glasnost* had opened up unprecedented opportunities for the emergence of independent media, free from state censorship and institutionalized self-censorship.

Responding to the end of Soviet rule, Western countries, particularly the United States, launched new media initiatives to upgrade journalistic, technical, and management skills and to foster an institutional environment supportive of a free press. The former Soviet Union and its satellites served as laboratories wherein the international community and its local partners refined different media development strategies and programs. Contemporary thinking on media assistance owes much to these efforts and experiences.

Second, tragic events in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia amply demonstrated to policymakers and the public that the media, controlled by the state or particular ethnic factions, could be a powerful force in instigating and directing violence. As the media help to define the nature and implications of latent or manifest conflict for decisionmakers and shapes public opinion, biased, intolerant, and inaccurate reporting of events can inflame public passions and fears. In contrast, balanced reporting can reduce political tensions and contribute to the resolution of conflict.

As a result, during the 1990s the international community started supporting a wide array of media projects in countries torn apart by civil wars. Donors focused on the postconflict phase, when war had subsided and some semblance of order had been established. Prime examples are Bosnia, Croatia, East Timor, Kosovo, and Serbia, each of which has received significant media assistance. The international community has also been funding modest initiatives in many African countries—such as Burundi, Congo, and Liberia—to ease ethnic and religious tensions while promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Third, the information revolution that is transforming the global economy has also contributed to an increased international involvement in the media. Such changes have underscored the potentially critical role played by the media in economic growth and transformation. A broad consensus has emerged among development experts that economic growth and media freedom are often intertwined. As former World Bank president James Wolfensohn put it, “To reduce poverty, we must liberate access to information and improve the quality of information. People with more information are empowered to make better choices” (World Bank Institute 2002, v). Farmers, businessworkers, traders, bankers, entrepreneurs, industrialists, monetary and fiscal experts, and the general citizenry require a free flow of information to make the best decisions. And the information in demand pertains not only to financial but also to social and political factors that shape the economic environment, creating opportunities and incentives for individual entrepreneurship.

Although the current approach to media assistance emerged in recent years, development experts dating back to the 1950s recognized the importance of the media and modern communications in fighting pervasive poverty. The theoretical justification for focusing on the media came from experts such as Daniel Lerner and Wilber Schram, who examined the complex process through which the media engenders economic and social change. Daniel Lerner’s *Passing Away of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, which analyzed

the role of mass media in the Middle East's modernization process, has had a profound influence on development theory.

Fourth, there is a widespread recognition that independent media contributes to public accountability, curtailing widespread corruption that plagues economic and political institutions in the developing world. The experience of developed democracies shows that investigative journalism saves taxpayers' money and improves the performance of public institutions by driving out corrupt officials. Although the presence of independent media is no panacea for effective government, it does help in creating responsive political culture and public institutions.

Finally, the threat of terrorism has also stimulated policymakers' interest in independent media development. For example, many foreign-policy experts suggest that the absence of democracy in the Middle East, particularly in countries deemed to be Western allies, has directly and indirectly contributed to the growth of international terrorism. Because these countries do not permit internal dissent and debate, public anger and frustration against the government is often directed toward the West, particularly the United States. A significant portion of the public blames the United States and other Western countries for their government's failures. To address this phenomenon, democratic institutions—including a free press—need to be promoted and nurtured in these countries to enable opposition parties and voices to participate in the political process. US foreign policy makers now place a priority on independent media development in the Middle East. Many initiatives are under way.

All of these factors—a wave of democratic reform, the collapse of Soviet rule, media-fueled sectarian war, the information revolution, the threat of terrorism, and concerns about corrupt governance—have contributed to the growing engagement of the international donor community in media development. Despite their enthusiasm for media assistance, donors tend to have realistic expectations about what independent media can or cannot achieve. They are acutely aware that in many societies emerging from totalitarian or autocratic rule, the media's role is compromised by tainted economic, social, and political structures that undermine economic growth and political freedom.

Actors in International Media Assistance

Since the early 1990s the number of international actors engaged in media assistance has increased dramatically, reflecting enhanced public

and policy interest and funding. These actors fall generally into two categories—donors and intermediaries. Donors provide resources whereas intermediary organizations design and implement projects, usually in cooperation with local partners in the recipient countries.⁴

Three kinds of international donors—bilateral donor agencies, international governmental organizations, and private foundations—deserve particular mention. Bilateral agencies continue to be the major source of funding for media development. Among them, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been the largest donor, providing more than \$260 million in media assistance over the past decade. Most of its assistance has gone to the Balkans, Eastern and Central Europe, and Eurasia. Other prominent bilateral agency donors include the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the British Department for International Development (DFID), and the Swedish International Development Agency.

A number of intergovernmental organizations also provide support for media development. These include the United Nations, the World Bank, the European Commission (EC), the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The largest donor in this subcategory is the European Commission, which has worked in partnership with other international organizations such as the OSCE, European Reconstruction Agency (EAR), and Council of Europe. In addition, it has also directly funded media outlets, NGOs, and educational institutions, and in some cases EC funding has exceeded USAID levels. The World Bank is also becoming more active in the media sector and may emerge in the future as a major actor because of its financial and intellectual clout.

Many large and small private foundations have also supported the growth of media in developing and transition countries. These include the Ford Foundation, the Independent Journalism Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Markle Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Soros Foundation Network. Three German foundations—Friedrich Ebert, Friedrich Naumann, and Konrad Adenauer Stitungen—have also funded media projects. Most of these foundations have given grants for short- and long-term journalism training, exchange visits for journalists, and international dialogues and meetings. However, the Soros Foundation Network, including the Open Society Institute, has played an influential role in many postcommunist countries in Europe and Eurasia and has funded a wide variety of media interventions.

Most donors work with intermediary organizations as they lack technical expertise and organizational resources to design and implement media programs. In the case of major bilateral agencies, such as USAID, this course is politically prudent as well. Often the recipient countries are more receptive if media assistance is provided through established intermediary organizations rather than from the bilateral donor directly.

Two NGOs have received the lion's share of US government media assistance funding, Internews and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). Internews has also received funds from many European donors, including the European Commission and the UK's DFID, as well as national and international foundations. IREX has been active largely in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Like Internews, it has been providing multifaceted media assistance, ranging from training to legal assistance and strengthening local media organizations. IREX has tended to work more with print media than Internews, though programs vary from country to country. There is also a slight difference in overall strategy, with Internews establishing its own affiliate in a country whereas IREX works with existing indigenous institutions and media outlets.

Several European media NGOs have gained a reputation for experience and excellence in media assistance. Amsterdam-based Press Now receives funds from the Dutch government as well as other donors. It has worked extensively on myriad projects in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, providing training, equipment, and managerial advice. Other important NGOs include the Danish Baltic Media Center (funded mainly by the Danish government), Medienhilfe in Switzerland, and London-based Article 19, which seeks to promote media freedom through legal advice and advocacy.

In addition, there are many media organizations that seek to defend the rights of journalists and news organizations, fight censorship, and offer educational and training programs. Paris-based *Rapporteur sans Frontières* publicizes and protests abuses of media freedom around the world. The International Federation of Journalists in Brussels is a membership organization of journalists' associations from different countries. Similarly, the World Association of Newspapers provides a global platform for publishers, and the International Press Institute links editors, publishers, journalists, and academics (Darbishire 2002, 332).

Many universities have established media centers and received funds from donors to undertake training and educational programs. For example, as described in Chapter 3, Florida International University

has received funds from USAID to manage a large journalism training program in Central America. Finally, commercial consulting firms have also entered the arena of media assistance. Several US firms have designed, managed, and implemented media assistance projects; among them are Creative Associates, Development Alternatives, and Management Systems International.

Origin of the Book

Despite substantial international investment in media assistance, little has been written about the field. There are no books, doctoral theses, or even research articles in professional journals analyzing the subject and the possible effect of media aid. Although there is a growing literature on emerging media in developing and transitional countries, such literature does not examine the role of international assistance. At best there are only superficial references to existing or planned international efforts.

The lack of literature on international media assistance is not so surprising. Large-scale assistance for building independent media is relatively new, having begun in the 1990s. Much of the information about these programs remains embedded in the experiences of the practitioners still heavily engaged in developing projects. Unfortunately, these practitioners have had little time to systematically reflect on their experiences and record them for others. Moreover, many international donors engaged in media assistance have preferred to take a low profile because of the political sensitivities involved.

This book represents one step in explaining international efforts to promote independent media. It attempts to examine the nature and significance of media assistance, discussing the evolution of the field, the focus of various programming approaches, and the possible impact of such efforts. It presents case studies of media assistance programs in different countries. The book concludes with a set of recommendations for expanding and deepening media assistance for the international community.

This book project grew out of a multi-country study that I directed in 2002–2004 to examine media assistance programs funded by the US Agency for International Development. The overall purpose of the study was to assess the nature and effectiveness of USAID programs and make policy and programmatic recommendations for the future. In writing this book I have mostly drawn from the massive information collected during two years of research and analysis.

The book is based primarily on three sources of information. First are reviews of literature covering scholarly writings, project and program documents, and articles in popular magazines and newspapers on media assistance. Such reviews were country specific as well as global in nature. Because the academic literature is extremely limited and media assistance is hardly covered in magazines and newspapers except in high-profile cases such as Bosnia and Serbia, reviews largely relied on program documentation. I had the unique advantage of perusing thousands of documents that are not available to the public. Although mostly descriptive and often self-serving, they identified critical gaps in our knowledge and illuminated the challenges and achievements of international media endeavors.

Second, my colleagues and I undertook extensive fieldwork in seven countries/regions—Afghanistan, Bosnia, Central America, Indonesia, Russia, Serbia, and Sierra Leone. In each of these cases, research teams conducted extensive discussions with international donor agencies, officials of host countries, project staff and contractors, and local media experts and journalists. Every possible effort was made to interview all those experts and managers who had intimate knowledge of the ongoing media assistance programs. Teams also examined locally available documents and reports and used translators to translate documents into English when necessary. In the absence of hard quantitative data, they largely relied on available documentation, in-depth interviews, and their own knowledge of the media scene for their findings and conclusions.

Finally, I organized a series of meetings in Washington, D.C., to discuss the findings of the country studies and explore new directions for media assistance programs. Such meetings helped to identify many problems and challenges facing media assistance programs and helped in formulating a set of recommendation for policymakers.

Two criteria have been used in selecting countries for this book. Every effort has been made to include at least one country from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Second, and more important, every effort has been made to include countries that were major recipients of international media assistance.

Organization of the Book

In addition to this introductory chapter, the book contains nine others. Chapter 2 explains the major programming approaches that the international community has used to promote the growth of independent

media. These approaches include improving journalistic skills and expertise, promoting the economic viability of independent media enterprises, reforming existing legal and regulatory regimes, strengthening media organizations, promoting the transformation of state media outlets, and building alternative media. All these approaches are mutually complementary and reinforcing. International donors have employed each of these strategies at some point, taking into consideration the local conditions and circumstances.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Latin American Journalism Project (LAJP), which was the first major international initiative to promote independent media. Managed by Florida International University and funded by the US Agency for International Development, the project trained thousands of journalists in Central America, established a regional journalism training center in Panama, and left a lasting impression on the media scene in the region. This chapter describes the structure of the project, its achievements and limitations, and the factors that affected its performance and efficacy. It also identifies a set of lessons to be drawn from the project.

Chapter 4 describes a major media assistance project designed to promote the growth of independent, regional television stations in the Russian Federation. This project, called the Independent Television Project, was launched by Internews in 1992 with financial support from USAID. The project has contributed to the emergence of about 600 regional television stations that are economically viable. The chapter describes the conditions under which the project was launched and the factors that have contributed to its success.

Chapter 5 looks at Serbia, where independent media, with generous international assistance, played an important role in the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic in the 2000 elections. The chapter explains the nature of international assistance and how it helped alternative media outlets in the country survive Milosevic's authoritarian rule and eventually overthrow it. The chapter also discusses the special media assistance programs that were devised for the elections, and it explains post-Milosevic developments in international assistance.

Chapter 6 recounts an ambitious but flawed attempt by US and European donors to establish a multiethnic, tolerant broadcasting network in Bosnia-Herzegovina after the signing of the Dayton peace agreement. Known as the Open Broadcasting Network, the project was meant to provide an alternative to ultranationalist broadcasters by offering balanced coverage of news and events without ethnic or religious prejudice. The chapter examines how the project was launched,

its conflicting goals, its achievements and setbacks, and the lessons it holds for future media efforts in similar settings.

Chapter 7 focuses on a project assisting fifty independent radio stations in Indonesia. The project, launched after the fall of President Suharto's regime, provided journalism training, equipment, technical assistance, and programming support to participating radio stations. The chapter examines the impact of the assistance on the radio stations and the radio sector as a whole.

Chapter 8 discusses international media assistance to Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001. It particularly examines a major project that seeks to establish a network of community radio stations throughout the country to broadcast local and national news and public affairs programs. It discusses the nature of international assistance, the working of newly established radio stations, and the challenges they face. The chapter also examines the prospects for their survival after international assistance dries up.

The subsequent chapter describes Talking Drum Studio in Sierra Leone, which seeks to promote peace and reconciliation in that war-torn society. Funded by multiple donors and managed by Search for Common Ground, the studio produces entertaining but educational radio programs—news features, stories, dramas, and even sport events—that are distributed to participating radio stations. These programs have been quite popular with a cross-section of the people. The chapter discusses the nature and working of the studio and its overall impact on improving the climate for peace.

Chapter 10 rounds out the book by outlining recommendations for future media assistance efforts.

Clarifying the Terms

A few expressions in this book are used to communicate the main ideas and case studies but require clarification to avoid confusion. *The media* is broadly defined to encompass both print and broadcast media. It includes newspapers, periodicals, magazines, radio and television stations, and even the Internet. It does not refer to telephone communications. As conceptualized here, *media assistance* refers to economic, technical, and financial assistance provided by the international community to build and strengthen independent media. Its primary purpose is to develop an indigenous media sector that promotes democracy and development. *Independent media* indicates nonstate

media or media enterprises owned by individuals, corporations, and nonprofit organizations. Such a definition sets aside separate considerations about the possible control over media by vested economic and political interests.⁵ An underlying premise and objective of media assistance is to uphold journalistic inquiry and to support news organizations that are editorially independent and free of direct political control.

The international community refers to all bilateral and multi-lateral donor agencies, international organizations and associations, international NGOs, private foundations, and other organized groups engaged in international assistance. This term obviously does not imply that all these international agencies and groups speak with one voice or share identical objectives.

War-torn societies indicates those countries with ongoing low- and high-intensity conflicts, whereas *postconflict societies* refers to the countries in which peace accords have been signed or one party of the conflict has emerged victorious. Postconflict societies can face renewed tensions and violence, thereby acquiring the status of war-torn societies. *Transitional societies* is used to describe a relative level of social and economic development in which a totalitarian or autocratic political order has collapsed, opening the way for liberalization and democratization.

Notes

1. No precise figures are available. This estimate is from Hume 2002, p. 3.
2. A USAID official once bitterly complained to me about a Serbian newspaper that had received US assistance but had criticized US policies in the country. The official was disappointed because he saw the purpose of assistance as a way of winning friends for the United States, not developing indigenous media.
3. I met many journalists in Africa who after their sojourn to Europe and the United States waged a struggle for press freedom in their own societies.
4. For an excellent discussion of the various actors involved in international media assistance programs, please see Price, Noll, and De Luce 2002. This document was contracted by USAID to the Program in Comparative Media Law and Policy, Center for Socio-Legal Studies, at Oxford University.
5. I am fully aware of the limitations of the term. I have followed this definition for empirical rather than conceptual reasons. In many developing and transitional countries, there is often no way to find out who controls a media outlet. Moreover, the loyalties of media owners change over time.