

# What Do Free Press Indicators Say About Democracy?

## Short Essay

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### Biography

Lee B. Becker (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, Madison) is Professor and Director of the James M. Cox Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research in the Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. He has written extensively on various forms of journalism education and training, on journalistic practice, and on the journalism and mass communication labor market. His recent books include the edited volumes, *The Evolution of Key Mass Communication Concepts*, and *Copyright and Consequences*, both published by Hampton Press.

The simple answer to the question posed for this session is: Not very much. Free Press Indicators do not directly tell us about democracy. At the same time, the assumptions we make about the relationship between free press indicators and democracy is extremely important, both for deciding what to measure and for deciding what to do with what we measure.

My perspective on the topic comes from recent work we have been doing in the Cox Center on the impact of media assistance. Our long-term goal has been to map media assistance to examine and evaluate outcomes of that assistance.

Kumar (2006), a senior social scientist at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), has explained the dominant western perspective lying behind media assistance projects. Media assistance, he writes, is based on the underlying assumption that independent media contribute to the building of democracy. The assistance is directed at journalistic practice and the media itself, he continues,

“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 (p. 1).”

The language, of course, is that of western, liberal, press theory, as articulated by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) in their classic work on normative press theory. Media assistance is expected to produce better journalists, better media organizations, and a better media system. That media system is supposed to produce, or at least contribute to, the development of democracy.

Much emphasis in the media assistance programs, in fact, has been placed on training of the journalists. The training is designed to produce more skilled and motivated workers whose work will help create media organizations that facilitate and distribute their work. Media assistance programs also are directed at these media organizations. Some such training programs even have created media organizations, such as radio and television stations and newspapers. Others have provided subsidies for existing organizations. These organizations are supposed to operate in a way that creates a free—or independent—competitive media environment. Finally, media assistance is directed at the media system as well. For example, assistance programs have employed legal advisers who have drafted laws to help create the legal environment in which free media can operate. This set of relationships is presented in the figure below.

The figure underscores one key point. Free media are expected to create information that can be used by the institutions of civil society to foster a functioning democracy. The expectation is that the free media produce information that is functional from the point of view of governmental institutions, such as the judiciary, the legislative bodies, the executive institutions, and the various nongovernmental organizations that make up civic life. These institutions are expected to make use of this functional information to create the democratic society.

The concept of media freedom, to be sure, is a contentious one in the literature of mass communication. Early definitions of the concept reflected post World War II geopolitical construction and focused primarily on freedom from government control (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956).

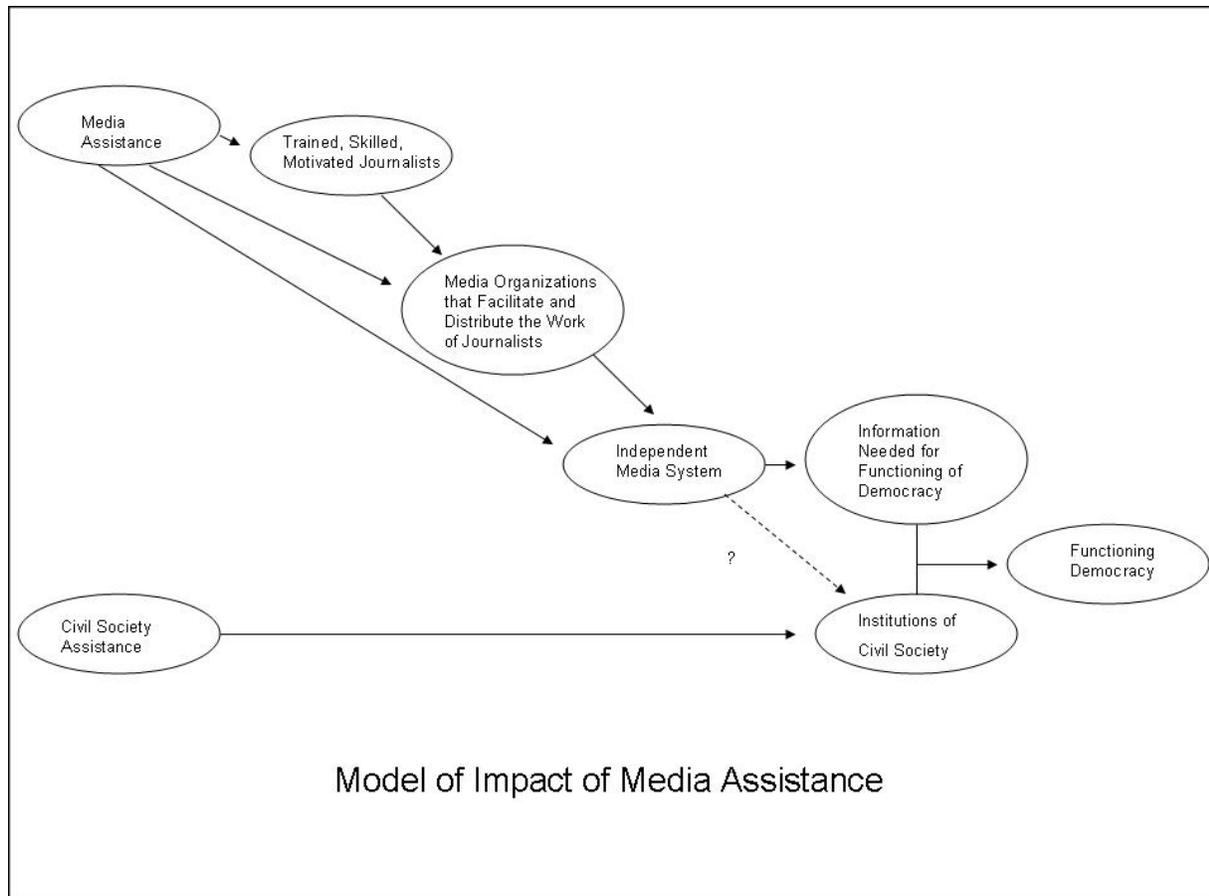
Curran (1996) differentiated between a classical liberal perspective on media freedom and the radical democratic perspective. The former focuses on the freedom of the media to publish or broadcast. The latter focuses on how mass communications can “mediate in an equitable way conflict and competition between social groups in society.” Within the classical liberal perspective, according to Curran, is a “strand” arguing that the media should serve to protect the individual from the abuses of the state. Within the radical democratic perspective, he continued, is a “strand” that argues that the media should seek to redress the imbalances in society.

For Price (2002), the “foundation requirement” for media freedom is that government does not have a monopoly on information. Rozumilowicz (2002) similarly contended that the question of who controls the media is critical to consideration of whether it is free and independent. There must be a diffusion of control and access supported by a nation’s legal, institutional, economic and social-cultural systems, she argues. Thus, free and independent media “exist within a structure which is effectively demonopolized of the control of any concentrated social groups or forces and in which access is both equally and effectively guaranteed.” Rozumilowicz sees media independence as the outcome of a process of media reform.

Rozumilowicz (2002) provides a clear summary of the arguments for the expected relationship between the media and democracy. She makes five key points. First, a media structure that is free of interference from government, business or dominant social groups is better able to maintain and support the competitive and participative elements that define democracy and the related process of democratization. Second, free and independent media buttress the societal objectives of democracy, a particular economic structure, greater cultural understanding and general human development. Third, free and independent media allow individuals to find a public forum in which to express opinions, beliefs and viewpoints to their fellow citizens. Free and independent media inform, entertain and enrich the life through the profusion of others’ ideas, opinions and visions. Fourth, free and independent media provide for an expression of options so meaningful decisions can be made. And fifth, free and independent media guarantee access to the less privileged in society, giving them voice.

Formative work on comparative media systems by Hallin and Mancini (2004) suggests, however, that the relationship is even more complex. They identify three different models of media systems, which are empirically based but which they have presented as ideal types. Each of these types has a different relationship with the political system of which it is a part. The point is simple and sobering. It means that there is no single definition of free media, and that the relationship between media content and democratization may be even more complex than a simple model would suggest.

At the very minimum, it is reasonable to ask which type of media system might best produce the content that is essential for democracy. That means that the measure of the media system is an extraordinarily complex undertaking. What is clear is that we know less about it than we need to know to do our various jobs effectively.



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