

Press Freedom Indices as Sources of Data

Short Essay

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Biography

Tudor Vlad (Ph.D., Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) is Assistant 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 worked as a journalist for 20 years and created and chaired a journalism program in Romania after the fall of communism. He has written on various forms of journalism education and training, on challenges of transition of media and journalism education in emerging democracies, and on the journalism and mass communication labor market. He published six books in Romania and co-edited *Copyright and Consequences*, published by Hampton Press.

More than 100 organizations throughout the world were engaged in 2004 in some form of media system assessment and evaluation or media freedom promotion. Many of these were newly-formed in response to recent democratization in East and Central Europe and former Soviet Union countries and redemocratization in Latin America. The groups described their missions variously as promoting free and independent media through activism, monitoring media freedom violations, evaluating media systems through indices and written reports, and defending and protecting journalists working in conflict zones and under repressive governments.

The organizations have applied rather than conceptual goals for their work. They are interested in media reform often because they believe it plays a role in the development of democratic states. Their work is often described and cited in the popular media, giving weight to their operationalizations –and consequent conceptualizations—of media freedom. We reviewed in more detail the work of 14 organizations involved in media evaluation. The 14 organizations were all global or regional in scope, allowing for country by country comparisons of their findings and conclusions. Their reports were characterized by comprehensiveness, methodical research, and particular expertise in the areas they cover, often deriving from the organizations' longevity, the experience and knowledge of their staffs, and their use of varied, in-country sources. One of the notable aspects of the existing indices was that they are heavily oriented toward application. Little effort has been made to define the theoretical concepts being used. Mostly, one must guess about what it is that the organization is actually trying to measure.

The empirical analysis of the numeral ratings of three of these organizations – Freedom House, IREX, and Reporters sans frontieres – showed that they largely come to the same conclusions about the characteristics of media in different countries. The usefulness of any

amalgamation of the Freedom House measure with that of RSF, IREX or other organizations, is its match to the theoretical concepts of interest and to other systemic variables, such as the evolution of a civil society and key democratic institutions.

Media freedom often is viewed as intrinsically important and is seen by many as related to development of democratic institutions and a civil society. In the view of some, media reform is needed for media freedom, and media freedom is a necessary condition for democratization.

Because of the importance of media freedom, western governments and private funders have invested heavily in training of media workers and in media reform in order to bring it about. In a 2005 report to the Knight Foundation, we identified 70 organizations in 25 donor countries outside the United States that were involved in funding media assistance project. Donors were units of governments in single countries, nongovernmental organizations, including foundations, and multinational organizations. Based on the most recent year for which reporting organizations provided data on media assistance, \$0.75 billion was being spent each year on media assistance projects by donors from outside the United States. By adding the U.S. spending estimates provided by *The Media Missionaries* (2004), the actual level of spending for media assistance is likely to be in the neighborhood of \$1 billion annually.

During the early stages of this project, efforts had been made to identify all organizations in these 26 countries involved in some phase of media assistance, either as a *funder* of these projects or as *provider* of some form of assistance, such as training, support for media organizations, or assistance in the development of law in support of operation of independent media. (For the latter, we adopted the definition used in Monroe Price's *Mapping Media Assistance* report (2002).) As the project evolved, work focused most heavily on the funding

organizations in the 25 donor countries other than the United States, consistent with the project goal.

Creating a database with the implementers or providers of media assistance around the world would be a challenging but not impossible mission. Such a data base would contain - where records are available - the types of programs that were implemented and evaluations of the programs' impact. Our research has revealed the wide range of media assistance programs that have been conducted since 1989 and the limited attempts to evaluate these initiatives. What evaluation has been done has focused on individual programs, rather than on the overall consequences of investment. In most of the cases, the implementer and the evaluator were the same organization. The lack of coordination among media assistance programs has led - especially in East and Central Europe in the mid nineties - to a situation where similar journalism training projects were conducted in the same region at the same time, so it is almost impossible to assess the impact of an individual program.

The database for the funders project has been designed so that it can be expanded. When the media assistance organizations and the types of programs are added, that will allow for an examination not only of the relationship between investment and outcome, but of the relationship between type of investment and outcome.

The outcome of interest is press freedom and related concepts. Since a number of indicators of media freedom, media sustainability, civil society, level of democratization, economic development and the like already exist, it ~~also~~ will be possible to examine the linkage between media investment and these characteristics as well.

The consequence of this coordination and integration of existing and ongoing assessment

will be evaluative research for the field of media development to parallel and complement the assessment in the general field of democracy promotion. The overall goal of this work is to inform funders, government organizations and scholars about empirical links between media assistance, press freedom and democratization that will guide investment, policy and inquiry.

References

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