

Methodological Issues in Measuring Media Freedom In A Global Context

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A B S T R A C T

This paper pays particular attention to the challenges of defining media freedom and the need to expand the concept to include a broader sense of communication freedom. The distinction between media freedom and expressive freedoms has blurred now that communicators no longer depend on media institutions. Measurement must reflect this change. The paper also raises the question of the proper role of citizen assessments of media freedom in an overview measure of media freedom.

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Researchers began creating measures of press freedom and linking those measures to both antecedents and consequences of that freedom in the early 1960s. Freedom House, a media advocacy group, began its rankings of press freedom in 1980, and today, competing rankings are being produced by other organizations with similar goals. These public ratings have become the dominant indicators of media freedom used by academics and nonacademics alike.

The existing rankings have both methodological and conceptual limitations, exacerbated by the dramatic changes taking place in the media landscape around the world. This paper examines both those methodological and conceptual issues and discusses their implications for use of these indicators by those who wish to employ them for a variety of purposes.

The conclusion is that the measures commonly used to measure media freedom meet the basic standard of reliability. Assessing their validation is more difficult, because of conceptual limitations. Those conceptual problems need to be addressed in the future.

Measurement of Media Freedom

The indicators of three different organizations are most prominent in the discussion of media freedom. The best known and most widely used measure of the press freedom is that of Freedom House. A non-governmental organization based in Washington, D.C., Freedom House was founded in 1941 to promote democracy globally. Since 1978, Freedom House has published a global survey of freedom, known as Freedom in the World, now covering 195 countries and 14 territories (Freedom House, 2014). This indicator is widely used by policy makers, academics, and journalists. In 1980, as a separate undertaking, it began conducting its media freedom survey—Freedom of the Press: A Global Survey of Media Independence—which in 2014 covered 197 countries (Freedom House, 2014).

To measure the press freedom concept, Freedom House assigns each country a score to reflect whether the country promotes and does not restrict the free flow of information. The methodology of Freedom House has evolved over time, has become more complex, and has become more transparent (Becker, Vlad & Nusser, 2007). From 1980 to 1992, Freedom House used only a three-point ordinal scale to classify countries as “Free,” “Partly Free,” or “Not Free” in terms of press freedom. A 100-point scale was introduced for the 1993 release, though only rough details of its application were provided. At present, Freedom House selects a person with knowledge of a country to use that 100-point scale to rate a country. Freedom House asks the raters to use 23 questions divided into three broad categories covering the legal environment, the political environment and the economic environment. These ratings are reviewed in a series of six regional meetings with the analysts, with ratings advisers with expertise in each region, with other invited participants and with Freedom House staff. Freedom House then compares the ratings with the previous year’s findings. These reviews are followed by cross-regional assessments in which efforts are made to ensure comparability and consistency in the findings.

At present, when Freedom House releases the ratings each year, it reduces the data on the countries gathered by collapsing responses from 0 to 30 and designating countries with those scores as “Free.” Countries with scores of 31 to 60 are labeled as “Partly Free.” Countries with scores of more than 60 are labeled as “Not Free.” A map of the world classifying countries that is released each year is based on this distinction. And an analysis of the distributions of scores in the years Freedom House has produced its ratings with the 100-point scales shows that these distributions are bimodal, with the modes at or near 30 and 60 each year (Becker, Schneider &

Vlad, 2013). Clearly awareness of the three-point ordinal scale has influence on how evaluators use the 100-point scale.

Freedom House has its main office in Washington, and the organization's operation there often is associated with conservative elements of U.S. foreign policy. Freedom House conducts the research for its Freedom in the World and Press Freedom indices out of its office in New York, and it states that these surveys are funded from a variety of sources separately from other Freedom House activities and not funded by the United States Government.

Reporters Without Borders (RWB) has released annually since 2002 a Worldwide Press Freedom (RWB, 2002) report and ranking of individual nations. Based in Paris, RWB defends journalists and media outlets by condemning attacks on press freedom worldwide, by publishing a variety of annual and special reports on media freedom, and by appealing to governments and international organizations on behalf of journalists and media organizations. The RWB index has been seen as a French and European counterpoint to the Freedom House measures (Holtz-Bacha, 2011).

RWB bases the score for each of the 180 countries it currently rates on responses of its selected panelists to a questionnaire that was revised in 2013 to reflect changes in the media challenges and challenges faced by the media (Schneider, 2014). The questionnaire includes questions about the number of journalists, media assistants and netizens who were jailed or killed in the connection with their activities, the number of journalists abducted, the number that fled into exile, the number of physical attacks and arrests, and the number of media censored. In addition, the questionnaire focuses on issues that are hard to quantify such as the degree to which news providers censor themselves, government interference in editorial content, or the

transparency of government decision-making. Legislation is the subject of some questions. Questions have been added or expanded, to address issues such as concentration of media ownership, allocation of subsidies or state advertising, discrimination in access to journalism and journalism training. In 2014, the questionnaire was sent to 18 freedom of expression groups, to a network of 150 correspondents around the world, and to journalists, researchers, jurists and human rights activists (RWB, 2014) Funding for Reporters Without Borders has come from organizations.

A third organization, International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), also conducts elite evaluations of media systems. IREX is a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., that was founded in 1968 by U.S. universities to promote exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. In 2001, IREX, in cooperation with USAID, prepared its first Media Sustainability Index (MSI) to evaluate the global development of independent media (IREX, 2001). IREX (2012) measures five criteria of a successful, independent media system. First, IREX measures the extent to which legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information. Second, IREX measures whether the journalism in the media system meets professional standards of quality. Third, the MSI determines whether the system has multiple news sources that provide citizens with reliable and objective news. The fourth criterion is whether the media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence. Finally, MSI examines the supporting institutions in society to determine if they function in the professional interests of independent media.

Media systems are scored in two steps. First, IREX assembles a panel of experts in each country, drawn from representatives of local media, NGOs, professional associations and media-

development implementers. The panelists' scores are reviewed by IREX, in-country staff and/or Washington, DC, media staff, which then score the countries independently of the MSI panel. IREX says that the final scores are a combination of these two scores.

IREX began its MSI in 2001, tracking development of independent media in a limited number of countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Efforts to expand MSI have continued, and it currently covers 21 countries in Europe and Eurasia (IREX, 2014), 41 countries in Africa (IREX, 2010), and 19 countries in Middle east and North Africa (IREX, 2009).

IREX, at least implicitly, began with the idea of doing something more than and different from what Freedom House was doing. While its initial funding source was USAID, a branch of the U.S. government, IREX has obtained funds from other sources over the years.

Reliability and Validity of Measures

We became interested in these various measure as a result of a conversation with Dr. John Bare, then in charge of evaluation work for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in Miami, Florida. Bare asked us to determine if the existing measures, independently, in combination, or as part of a new index with other components, could be used to assess whether media assistance work around the world had produced the hoped-found outcomes in terms of media reform.

In our early work we focused on the internal and across-time reliability of the Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and IREX measures, on the internal consistency of the components of the Freedom House and IREX measures, on the relationships among those three measures, and on the ability of the Freedom House measures to identify dramatic changes across time (Becker, Vlad & Nusser, 2007). We found that the measures were reliable across time, that

they were internally consistent, that they largely measure the same concept or at least highly correlated concepts, and that the Freedom House measures reflected the major changes in the media environment associated with the collapse of communism in eastern and central Europe in the last decade of the last century. Those analyses largely ended with data collected in 2003.

We next extended those analyses to data collected and reported to the end of 2008 (Becker& Vlad, 2009). We focused again on reliability across time and on the interrelationships among the Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and IREX measures. The Freedom House measures of Press Freedom to that point stretched across 28 years. We expected the measures to be relatively consistent year-to-year, when changes were expected to be slight, and less consistent across time, when changes were expected to accumulate. The average correlation year-to-year for the Freedom House measures was .96 (Pearson r). By tracking the score for an individual year across time, however, it is possible to see that the Freedom House measures are not static. The correlation between the measure of Press Freedom in 1980, when the scores were first used, with 1981, was .92. The correlation between the 1981 measure and the 2008 measure, however, was .57. This is true across time. The 1993 measure correlates .94 with the 1994 measure, but it correlates .84 with the 2008 measure.

The Reporters Without Borders measures of Press Freedom also were found to be consistent year-to-year. The average correlation was .94. The Reporters Without Borders measures were available only across seven years, but they, too, show evidence of decreasing correlations across time. The 2002 measure of press freedom correlated .94 with the 2003 measure but only .83 with the 2008 measure.

The IREX measures of Media Sustainability were harder to assess in this way, since IREX had added new countries over time. From 2001 to 2007, based on the consistent group of 18 countries, the average correlation year-to-year was .94. The 2001 to 2007 correlation for the same group of countries was .76.

Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders independently had measured Press Freedom from 2002 to 2008. In general, the two organizations reached much the same conclusion over the years about the media systems they evaluated. Across the seven years, the average correlation was .83.

It was possible to examine the correlations between the Freedom House and MSI index across seven years. The actual countries measured changed significantly across time, making comparisons a little difficult to evaluate. The correlations did vary, but overall they were high. The average across the seven years was .87. Across the five years in which the countries evaluated were roughly the same, that correlation was .90. Reporters Without Borders measured Press Freedom six years during which IREX also measured Media Sustainability. IREX, of course, had a smaller number of countries covered by its work, and, as noted, that number varied. The measures were correlated across time, but, overall, the correlation was lower between the Reporters Without Borders measures of Press Freedom and the IREX MSI measures than between the Freedom House measures of Press Freedom and the IREX Sustainability measures. The average correlation for the Reporters Without Borders and the IREX measures was .78, compared with the .87 for the Freedom House and IREX measures. The difference was not immense, but it was consistent across the years.

We also examined the relationship between a new measure, Freedom of the Net, released by Freedom House in 2009 (Karlekar & Cook, 2009) and the traditional Freedom House measure of press freedom (Becker & Vlad, 2010). While only 15 countries were included in the net survey, what these analyses showed was that the Freedom of the Net measure was very highly correlated with the average Freedom of the Press measure. The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient was $+0.93$. At the same time, the Net Freedom subindex for Violations of User Rights was more independent of the original Freedom House measure than was either the Obstacles to Access and Limitations on Content measure. The rho for the Violations of Users Rights with the average score of the original press freedom index was $.82$, compared with $.95$ for the Limits on Content subindex with the original measure and $.85$ for the Obstacles to Access subindex and the original index. The differences were small, but the analysis suggested that the Violations of User Rights subindex at least was picking up additional information missing from the original Freedom House measure.

We also have done some preliminary analyses of the results of the efforts of the Media Institute of Southern Africa in Windhoek, Namibia, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung to develop an assessment system for the continent's media that would use African criteria and be undertaken by Africans (Becker & Vlad, 2010b). The criteria used were drawn from the African Commission for Human and People's Rights Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, which was adopted in 2002. This document, in turn, drew on the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press and the 2001 African Charter on Broadcasting. The product is called the African Media Barometer.

What we found was that the relationship between the African Media Barometer measures for 2006 and 2007 and the comparable measures by Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and IREX were quite high. The two years of AMB data were combined to provide more cases for the analysis. The relationship between the African Media Barometer measure of press freedom and performance for 2006 and 2007 and the Freedom House measure for 2007 was .69 (Pearson) and .78 (Spearman). That same relationship for the Reporters Without Borders measure for 2007 was .72 (Pearson) and .81 (Spearman). For the IREX measures the correlation was weaker, with a .57 (Pearson) and a .31 (Spearman).

Conceptualization

Both the Freedom House and the Reporters Without Borders measures of press freedom come from the world of media advocacy. Freedom House was founded to promote democracy globally. Reporters Without Borders defends journalists and media outlets by condemning attacks on press freedom worldwide, by publishing a variety of annual and special reports on media freedom, and by appealing to governments and international organizations on behalf of journalists and media organizations.

Neither organization provides much by way of a conceptualization of the concept of press freedom. Freedom House says the concept is linked to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 holds that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media. (Freedom House, 2008). Freedom House says it seeks to provide a picture of the entire “enabling environment” in which the media in each country operate and to assess the degree of news and information diversity available to the public in any given country, from either

local or transnational sources. Reporters Without Borders (2008) says its measure reflects the degree of freedom that journalists and news organizations enjoy in each country and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom.

The International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) has a more academic background. It was founded in 1968 by U.S. universities to promote exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. A non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., IREX focuses on higher education, independent media, Internet development, and civil society in the United States and internationally. IREX, competes for funding for media assistance projects, particularly from U.S. government sources. IREX (2008) says its Sustainability Index assesses the development of independent media systems, that is, the hoped-for outcome of media assistance. Sustainability is defined as the extent to which political, legal, social, and economic circumstances and institutions, as well as professional standards within independent media, promote and/or permit independent media to survive over time.

When Freedom House began its work on press freedom, the concept already was in use in the political science and mass communication literature. Linz (1975), for example, listed freedoms of association, information, and communication as essential components of democracy. Gunther and Mughan (2000, p. 1) called mass media the “connective tissue of democracy.” O’Neil (1998) wrote that without the freedom of communication that the mass media provide, the foundation of democratic rule is undermined.

In the literature of mass communication, Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s (1956) *Four Theories of the Press* was particularly influential. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) identified four models or theoretical types of media. The first, historically, was the authoritarian

type, where the government controlled the press through prior censorship and through punishment after publication. They labeled a more current variant of the authoritarian model the Soviet Communist type. The libertarian model was seen as the counterpoint to the authoritarian model. The primary feature is the absence of government control. The fourth model, social responsibility, holds that the media have obligations to society that accompany their freedom. The work of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm normative, though it did make reference to historical change. Hallin and Mancini (2004) provided a rare empirical test of these models and found them wanting.

Perhaps because of this early formulation by Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, definitions of press freedom in the mass communication literature focus primarily on freedom from government control. According to Lowenstein (1970), a completely free press is one in which newspapers, periodicals, news agencies, books, radio and television have absolute independence and critical ability, except for minimal libel and obscenity laws. Weaver (1977) distinguished three components of press freedom: the relative absence of government restraints on the media, the relative absence of nongovernmental restraints, and the existence of conditions to insure the dissemination of diverse ideas and opinions to large audiences. Piccard (1985) distinguished between negative press freedom (the absence of legal controls, such as censorship) and positive press freedom (the ability of individuals to use the media).

Some have argued that definitions of media freedom should include other concepts, such as the role of media in nation building, economic development, overcoming illiteracy and poverty, and building political consciousness. For example, Hachten (1987) and Hagen (1992)

focused on media democratization and proposed altering the top-down, one-way flow of messages from contemporary mass media to the public by increasing citizen participation.

In another view, Breunig (1994) called press freedom one type of freedom of communication. Others were freedom of speech, freedom of opinion and information freedom. Curran (1996) has distinguished between the classic liberal perspective on media freedom and the radical democratic perspective. The classic liberal perspective focuses on the freedom of the media to publish or broadcast. The radical democratic perspective focuses on how mass communications can mediate in an equitable way conflict and competition between social groups in society. According to McQuail (2005), the concept of media freedom should both the degree of freedom enjoyed by the media and the degree of freedom and access of citizens to media content. Price (2002, p. 54) has argued that the “foundation requirement” for media freedom is that government does not have a monopoly on information. For Rozumilowicz (2002) argues that for a media system to be free there must be a diffusion of control and access supported by a nation’s legal, institutional, economic and social-cultural systems. 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, 2002, p. 14).

While there is not consensus in the academic literature on the proper conceptualization of media freedom, there does seem to be agreement that it should not be restricted to government constraints, or even to constraints from the marketplace. And media freedom should include some notion of the needs of citizens. McQuail’s position that media freedom should include freedom of the media and freedom and rights for the citizen captures this sentiment. In this

regard, the measures of press freedom of Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders are too limited, focusing most heavily on government constraints and attacks on the media, mostly from official channels. The Media Sustainability Index also has a bias toward media needs and rights, rather than towards those of the citizens.

Elite vs. Citizen Measures of Press Freedom

The Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders, IREX (and African Media Barometer) measures are all based on evaluations of media systems by elite evaluators. We also now have examined the relationship between the measures of media systems prepared by these three organizations and the measures reflected in public opinion surveys of the BBC World Service Poll, the Gallup World Poll, and WorldPublicOpinion.Org (Becker & Vlad, 2009, 2010b). In 2007, The BBC World Service Poll included a question that asked respondents in 14 countries to use a 5-point scale to indicate how free they thought the media in their country were to report the news accurately, truthfully and Without bias. In 2008, WorldPublicOpinion.Org, based at the University of Maryland, asked respondents to surveys conducted in 20 countries how much freedom the media in their country have.

The relationship between the measure of public perceptions of press freedom and the Freedom House measure of press freedom for the 14 countries included in the 2007 BBC WorldService Poll was only .23 (Spearman rho). The correlation between the BBC World Service Poll measures and the Reporters Without Borders was .25 (Spearman). The relationship between the WorldPublicOpinion.Org measure of press freedom from the point of view of the citizens and the Freedom House measure was a much stronger .76, while the relationship between the WPO measure and the Reporters Without Borders measure was .71. The discrepancy

between the findings from the two surveys was surprising. The surveys did use two different measures, and the BBC World Service Poll item was more complex and reverse scored. The more straight-forward WorldPublicOpinion.org measure did produce the stronger relationship.

Additional analyses of the relationship between public opinion measures and the elite evaluations of media systems were undertaken using Gallup data. The Gallup World Poll included a measure of confidence in the media in its core battery of items from 2005 to 2010. Respondents were asked if they had confidence in the quality and integrity of the media. We first compared Gallup measure with the measure of Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders measures of press freedom and with the Media Sustainability Index of IREX (Becker & Vlad, 2009). The Gallup measure of confidence was unrelated to Press Freedom as measured by Freedom House and by Reporters Without Borders. The correlations for the IREX measures were slightly positive. The IREX measure of Media Sustainability contains as one of its five components a measure of Journalistic Performance. The correlations increased slightly when this measure was used alone, suggesting that there is at least some slight link between Press Performance as measured by IREX and confidence in the press as measured by Gallup. The media systems with more professionally solid performance garner more confidence from their citizens.

We were able to return to the analysis of confidence in the media as measured by the Gallup core item and press freedom as measured by Freedom House later with a much richer data set, namely data gathered as part of the World Poll in years 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 (Becker, Vlad and English, 2010). In the last three of these years, we had more than 100 countries surveyed. We first standardized the confidence measure based on other confidence

measures in the data file. Usually, seven institutions were evaluated. Then we partitioned the sample into rough quadrants based on a measure of whether the respondent believed that others felt free to express political viewpoints. This partitioning of the data showed that the relationship between the confidence measures and the elite evaluations was masked. In those countries in which repression of freedom of expression was low, free media was associated with low levels of confidence in the media relative to confidence in other institutions in society. When repression of freedom of expression was high, however, press freedom was associated with high levels of confidence in the media. In free societies, it seems, the media suffer from their critical stance relative to other institutions in society. In restricted societies, the media benefit from a more independent and critical stance. That finding replicated across the three years for which data were available for this analysis, namely 2007, 2008 and 2009.

In 2010, Gallup added a variant of the WorldPublicOpinion.org item to its core, asking respondents if they believed the media in their country were free or not. We analyzed responses to that question and found that the simple correlation (Pearson) between press freedom as measured by Reporters Without Borders in 2010 and the aggregated data for the 111 countries for whom the citizen evaluation was available was .59 (English, Becker & Vlad, 2011). The Spearman rho was .70. We found that the relationship between the 2010 Freedom House measure of press freedom and the Gallup public opinion measure was .74, or considerably greater than the same relationship for the Reporters Without Borders measure. The Spearman rho was .75.

Most recently, we have analyzed the relationship between the Gallup measure of press freedom and the Gallup measure of confidence in the media (Becker, English and Vlad, 2011). Across the sample of countries, the belief that the media have a lot of freedom was correlated

only mildly with confidence in the media. The correlation coefficient was .21. The belief that the media are free is correlated slightly more strongly with confidence in other institutions, but in no case is the correlation strong. The belief that the media are free is unrelated to a measure of approval of the national leadership. Confidence in the media, in contrast, is more strongly correlated with confidence in the national government, financial institutions and religious organizations. As in the past, the elite evaluations of media freedom were only slightly correlated with confidence in the media in 2010. The relationship was negative rather than positive. The correlation between confidence in the media and the Freedom House measure of press freedom was -.18, while the correlation between confidence in the media and the Reporters Without Borders measure of press freedom was -.17.

What Now We Know About Measures of Media Freedom

We began this examination of the commonly used indicators of press freedom as skeptics. We knew they were part of the world of media advocacy. At that time, the methodologies were not clearly explained or documented.

The question we posed was simple: Could these indicators be used as a way of monitoring changes in the media systems of countries? We were looking for a way to test the impact of media assistance efforts, and we wanted to know if these existing indicators offered promise.

Partly as a result of our efforts, Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and IREX have become more transparent in their methodologies. They also have become more rigorous. They are competing for media attention and for support, and the competition has been a stimulant to innovation and improvement.

Our analyses of the indicators have led us to become quite confident in them. We know they are consistent across time, but not so consistent as to miss change. We know that Freedom House and IREX, which use subindices, produce internally consistent measures, but the subindices do report meaningful variability. We also know that all three organizations produce quite similar results, indicating that there is minimal “firm” effect, that is variability that might be due to political orientation or advocacy goals.

The differences that do exist now seem meaningful. The Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House measures purport to measure the same concept. On closer examination, however it is clear that the former places much more emphasis on attacks on journalists than does the latter. Analyses we have done of discrepancies in the two measures confirm this difference (Becker, Schneider & Vlad, 2013). So the concept of press freedom is narrower from the RWB perspective. And the analyses of assessments of press freedom from the point of view of the public suggests that the public has the broader perspective of Freedom House, rather than the narrower perspective of Reporters Without Borders.

Media Sustainability, as measured by IREX, is highly correlated with Press Freedom, as measured both by Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House. But it does not appear to be the same thing. The finding that the IREX measure is more highly correlated with the Freedom House measure than with the Reporters Without Borders measure again suggests the narrower focus of the latter. The IREX measure also is more highly correlated with the Gallup measure of confidence in the media than the two measures of press freedom. This, too, suggests that sustainability is a different concept from press freedom, though it is related to press freedom generally.

In sum, we feel the indices largely satisfy the criterion of reliability. The evidence is that random error (and, in the case of the possible “firm” effect, systematic error) is not a serious problem. We also feel that the three measures have some distinctiveness, with the Freedom House being the broader measure of press freedom than Reporters Without Borders measure. And we feel that media sustainability is a related but separate concept.

The question of validity is more complex. Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and IREX are not conceptually well developed, as we have noted. The measures and procedures used certainly are consistent with the terms, but it is hard to argue that the measures on their face are consistent with the concept or reflect the full range of the concept, given the lack of clear definitions of those terms.

The bigger question, of course, is what is left out of the definitions and what are the implications of these omissions. The most obvious limitation, as noted above, is that all of the measures focus most on constraints to press freedom that result from government action. They are less sensitive to limitations from the market or from other factors, such as journalistic or organizational incompetence. It is not fair to say that the organizations are insensitive to these forces. But each organization gives most weight to the traditional matters of lack of legal protection and of overt governmental constraints.

None of the measures reflects the concern of McQuail and others that a robust media freedom measure must incorporate audience needs and the rights of audience members to a free and complete flow of information. In this sense, the existing measures cover only half of the meaning of media freedom, namely the half represented by the freedoms of the media operatives.

All three measures are limited in other important ways. The first results from technological change in the media environment and its impact on media structure and journalistic behavior. All of the indices reflect some of these concerns. Freedom House has even gone so far as to create a separate index of Net Freedom. The challenge to the indices on this front is great, however, and it is likely to require modification of procedures in the future. The very definition of journalism and of journalists is changing rapidly. What affects the traditional media and what affects citizens acting as journalists may be quite different. Media freedom or some broader concept of journalistic freedom must incorporate both in today's world.

A broader issue is how to incorporate into the measure of media freedom in a single country the activities of media outside that country. Nation-state borders have come to mean less in the age of satellite broadcasting. And while countries have demonstrated some success in controlling what comes in through the Internet, the techniques are not perfect, and many work hard to overcome them. This is a fundamental challenge to the idea that the nation-state is the proper unit of analysis for the study of media freedom.

Another challenge is that nation-states usually have distinct media markets, and those markets may not all enjoy the same level of media freedom. The market in the capital, for example, might be more or less free than the markets outside the governmental center. Yet the existing measures ignore these differences by creating a single measure that attempts to incorporate the internal variability. The existing measures also do not differentiate between freedoms enjoyed by one form of the media but not by others. In many countries, the printed media differ from the visual and oral media in terms of the freedoms they enjoy. The existing measures are not explicit in how they handle these disparities.

The indicators also give less attention to the matter of content than would seem to be ideal. The IREX index does contain a subindex of press performance, and all of the indicators give some attention to this matter. But the quality of media content is not their primary concern.

The indices, in sum, suffer from their limited conceptualization. And the conceptualization weakness is a reflection of the limited theoretical development on the role of the media in the functioning of a society. Our presumption here is that we should not be concerned with media freedom as something of importance on its own, but rather we should be concerned with media freedom because we believe such freedom determines important society outcomes, such as creation of a functioning democracy and economy. The basic question, in the end, is what kinds of content are needed for democratic and economic development.

Because of the limited nature of our theoretical understanding of the role the media play in society, it is difficult to do much by way of construct validation through hypothesis testing. Our view is that much of the work that has been done relies on an overly simplistic model of media influence. Much of this work is designed to show that the media are an important component of democratization and economic development. Such simple correlational analyses may help encourage funders to invest in media assistance projects, but the long-term gain will come only with a better theoretical understanding of the interplay of the media with other forces in society. That relationship is likely to be very complex, and it is unlikely that simply freeing the media from the constraints of government is, on its own, going to produce positive outcomes.

In fact, some of our recent work casts doubt on whether it is possible to differentiate media freedom from political freedom generally (Karlekar & Becker, 2014). We analyzed the relationship between the two measures compiled by Freedom House, Freedom in the World and

Press Freedom, and showed that it is impossible to make the case empirically that media freedom either leads or follows political freedoms generally. We found through broad empirical analysis and a range of country case studies that press freedom is an integral part of freedom generally. Trends in one move most often in tandem with trends in the other, suggesting both that media freedom is unlikely to emerge and be sustained in the absence of improvements in broader political rights and civil liberties, and also that declines in press freedom almost always accompany or foreshadow a downturn in freedom more broadly.

We have invested our own energies in a narrow set of validation issues. We have asked if the measures of the elite evaluators match with those of the populace at large. The elite evaluators do not observe the media day-to-day. They bring in outside perspectives and concerns, rather than those of the people who make use of the media everyday. They are the elite, rather than the general citizenry.

The evidence is that the elite evaluators and the public generally agree on the media. But we also have found there is considerable variation. Our initial sense was that the elites had gotten it wrong, but we have come to a different conclusion now. We are more likely to believe that the overall environment in which the public renders its assessment of the media influences the evaluations of the media. And the political and social values of the public has much impact on how they view the media. In short, it may be less what the media do that influences how the public evaluates them than what is going on in the country more generally and what the evaluator believes to be true about those political, economic and social developments.

The starting point for our most recent analysis in this series was an interest in determining if outliers, i.e., countries where the elite and public evaluations differ, represented

methodological errors, cases where the public either lagged behind the elite assessment or anticipated them, or cases where there was a substantive difference between the public and the elite because, perhaps, they are measuring different things (Becker, English, Karlekar & Vlad, 2014). The last of these explanations seems to be the more likely one, given the limited amount of data available.

In terms of methodological differences regarding the question of what is being measured, one crucial factor that seems to be at play in at least a number of cases concerns the idea of “media freedom.” If viewed simply as the ability of media outlets to report about a range of issues, the public’s more positive assessments in a number of cases may not actually be at odds with Freedom House measurements, for the reason that the Freedom House methodology measures the ability of journalists to report freely *without fear of repercussions*. In countries scoring more harshly on the Freedom House indicators, the harsh score may simply be picking up the high level of repercussions, which is a factor that the public may simply not be taking into account when answering the question.

This conclusion raises an important question about the proper way to assess media freedom in a country. Should it include both an assessment of how well the country meets measurement criteria as determined by elite, objective observers from outside the country and an assessment of media freedom as measured by people who live in that system and experience it daily? Conceptually, the answer to that question is probably negative, i.e., media freedom does not necessarily mean that the public believes the media are free and vice versa. It might well be that having a public that sees the media as free is an additional element of what it means for a media system to be free. Or it could be that a free media where the public shares that assessment

has a different impact than a free media that the public does not feel is free. Of course, it is possible that a media that are not free, but that the public believes are free, could have an impact not predicted based on the assessment of media freedom lacking inclusion of the public component.

This does raise an interesting question which we have not yet examined: What are the effects of the public's assessment of the media on the role the media can play in democratization and social and economic change more generally? This can be put another way: Does our understanding of media freedom need to incorporate both public and elite assessments in order to help us better understand the role of the media in fostering social change?

At the very least, it seems likely that public opinion helps to mediate media influence. If the public does not believe the media are free, they are less likely to use them and to be influenced by their content, even if the elite assessment classes the media as free. Conversely, if the public believes the media are free, they are likely to be more responsive to them, even if the media are, in reality, reflecting narrow concerns of government or of corporate interests. As the minimum, future assessments of media freedom need also to understand and acknowledge public assessments of those media.

Concluding Comments

Measurement is the classification of objects according to some category scheme. The objects can be anything, from ears of corn, to tweets, to individuals, to groups, to nation states. Traditionally, nation states are the unit of analysis in discussions of media freedom, and those nation states are sorted according to the theoretical and operational definition of media freedom. It is easy to misstate the precision of such measurement generally and overstate the problems of

measuring media freedom at the level of the nation state. Schneider (2014), for example, is concerned about the “subjectivity” of the classification of the countries, particularly as that classification is done by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders. But this process needs to be compared with the imprecision of individuals classifying themselves according to their ideology, or researchers classifying a news story according to the agenda it represents or the frame it uses.

In the end, the criteria we have for evaluating measures is the extent to which they produce consistent classifications, i.e., classifications that are absent random error, and the extent to which the classifications reflect the concept, i.e., are absent systematic error. The starting point has to be a good conceptual definition. And the standards of evaluation are reliability and validity.

This is the strategy we have attempted to follow in our research program. We have made some progress, but the work is far from complete.

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