

Independence: global media | edited version

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World trends in freedom of expression and media development

Independence: Global media

Overview¹

Independence of journalists and of media outlets has become increasingly challenging as the fluidity of what constitutes ‘the press’ and who counts as ‘journalists’ due to lowering of production and dissemination barriers by online media, the conversion of some offline publications to online publications, and the two-way flow of information between the online and offline media. The internet has also been the driver behind the challenge to existing media business models, which have led to an increased reliance of global media on strategic foreign policy funding which are closely associated with risks of overt dependence and governmental “capture”.

Independence of International News Services

The largest news agencies, newspapers, and news channels are all governed by different models although there has been a trend towards state-owned international media since 2006² and online volunteer news collectives [see Pluralism:Global]. Agence-France Presse is state-owned, Reuters is privately owned (since 2008 as part of Thomson Reuters), Associated Press is collectively owned by its subscribers, Agencia EFE is privately owned, Bloomberg is privately owned, and Xinhua is state-owned. Different degrees of editorial independence from owners are operational within these media companies. Within the state-owned global news broadcasters — the larger ones being BBC, CCTV, China Radio International, China Russia Today, Voice of America, Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, Deutsche Welle, and France24 — there are different frameworks both

¹ This Overview sub-section presents a synopsis of the main trends in the region; supporting evidence, explanations and footnotes are provided in the text that follows.

² Mazumdar, S. (2011, October). News Media and Global Influence: The Story of China and India. *Asia Research Institute Working Paper Series* No. 165. p. 5. Painter, J. (2007, February). The Boom in Counter-Hegemonic News Channels: *A Case Study of Telesur. research paper presented to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.*

legally and in practice, as well as by platform.³ Given this, broad trends are difficult to pinpoint, although it has been observed that the performance of international broadcasting is related to complexities of foreign policy and their relationship to the current geopolitical environment.⁴ As such, Chinese foreign broadcasting reflects the geopolitical interests of the Chinese government, Al Jazeera has given Qatar a more prominent voice in global policy arenas, while Voice of America (VOA) continues to advance the geopolitical interests of the United States.⁵

It is almost inevitable that the government funding received by many international broadcasters has caused some to question their ability to provide neutral and impartial reporting.⁶ Public institutions with multi-year charters (BBC, SVT) and ownership by an independent trust (SVT) help insulate state-owned media outlets from governmental pressures.⁷ Another case is the VOA. This broadcaster is required by statute to engage in ‘clear and effective presentation of the policies of the United States Government and responsible discussion and opinion on those policies, including editorials [...] which present the views of the United States Government.’⁸ At the same time, VOA is also legally guaranteed editorial independence,⁹ and one study has found the broadcaster to be a credible source of news in its Asian news broadcast.¹⁰ This study went on to point out that audience perceptions of objectivity are important for a foreign news service to be seen as credible, and that this may help counter interference from

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- ³ This last point is underscored by the finding in China that the TV broadcaster CCTV is under far stricter control than official Chinese state news agencies that operate primarily in print, and that the Arabic and English versions of Al Jazeera television and websites differ, although this can vary by subject matter as well. See for example Abdul-Mageed, M., Herring, S. (2008). Arabic and English News Coverage on AlJazeera.net. In F. Sudweeks, H. Hrachovec, and C. Ess (Eds.), *Proceedings of Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology and Communication 2008*, Nimes, France, June 24-27. Fahmy, S., Al Emad, M. (2011, April). Al-Jazeera vs Al-Jazeera: A comparison of the network’s English and Arabic online coverage of the US/Al Qaeda conflict. *International Communication Gazette*. vol. 73 no. 3 216-232
- ⁴ Price, M. E. et al. (2008). New Technologies and International Broadcasting: Reflections on Adaptations and Transformations. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 150–172.
- ⁵ Price, M. (2009). End of television and foreign policy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political Science*. Price, M. (2002). *The Transformation of International Broadcasting*. Razón Y Palabra. http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/anteriores/n23/23_mprice.html. Peterson, J. (2006) Qatar and the World: Branding for a Micro-State Middle East Journal Vol. 60, No. 4, pp. 732-748 Middle East Institute <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4330320>. Seib, P. (2008). *The Al Jazeera effect: how the new global media are reshaping world politics*. Potomac Books Incorporated.
- ⁶ Grunes, A., Stucke, M. (2012). *Plurality of Political Opinion and the Concentration of the Media*. General Reports of the XVIIIth Congress of the International Academy of Comparative Law/Rapports Généraux du XVIIIème Congrès de l’Académie Internationale de Droit Comparé.
- ⁷ British Broadcasting Company (BBC) and Sveriges Television (SVT) are the British and Swedish, respectively, public service broadcasters.
- ⁸ United States International Broadcasting Act of 1994. Title 22, Ch. 71, Sec. 6202(b)(3) <http://uscode.house.gov/download/pls/22C71.txt>
- ⁹ Price, M. (2002). *The Transformation of International Broadcasting*. Razón Y Palabra. http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/anteriores/n23/23_mprice.html
- ¹⁰ Rampal, K., Adams, W. (1990). Credibility of the Asian News Broadcasts of the Voice of America and the British Broadcasting Corporation. *International Communication Gazette*, 46/2. pp. 93-111.

governments. At different times, international state-owned networks have been accused of being uncritical of their backing state (including Al Jazeera, BBC, CCTV, and Russia Today); however, there is a lack of good comparative studies in this area, and it is therefore difficult to confirm alleged bias with detailed evidence, nor is there any material to suggest any specific trends.

Separate from the issue of editorial independence, although with a bearing on it, the finances of state-owned international broadcasters are often tied to the foreign policy objectives of the state. The interdependence of funding for foreign language broadcasts and foreign policy objectives can be seen from the cuts faced by Voice of America¹¹, the BBC's World Service¹², and Radio Netherlands¹³ in the past decade which have led to many languages being dropped at the same time that Arabic-language news services were launched by those and other governments, most of these in the past six years.¹⁴ Meanwhile Iran and Qatar have launched English-language news stations and several global broadcasters started news services in Spanish in same period.¹⁵

Political influence and commercial pressure also compromise independence in both local and international media, and thus corporate ownership as distinct from state-ownership and strict government regulation is not a guarantee of press freedom or editorial independence.¹⁶ A study of public media in 14 democratic and developed states suggests that commercial pressures have been far more deleterious than partisan political meddling.¹⁷ Commercial pressures have impacted also on state-owned media, encouraging these outlets to appeal to a

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- ¹¹ Kiel, Paul. (2008, 9 July). Voice of America to Cut Language Services. *Pro Publica. Journalism in the Public Interest*. <http://www.propublica.org/article/voice-of-america-to-cut-language-services-709>; Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) Watcher. (2012, 25 February). *Demoralized Voice of America — Georgian Service*. <http://www.usgbroadcasts.com/bbgwatch/2012/02/25/demoralized-voice-of-america-georgian-service/>; Powers, S. (2010). *U.S. International Broadcasting: Un Untapped Resource for Ethnic and Domestic News Organization*. Public Policy and Funding the News. A Project of the USC Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy. http://fundingthenews.usc.edu/related_research/4_Carnegie_USInternationalBroadcasting.pdf
- ¹² Lyall, S. (2011, 26 January). BBC, Facing Budget Cuts, Will Trim World Service and Lay Off 650. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/world/europe/27bbc.html>; BBC. (2011, 26 January). *BBC World Service to cut five language services*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-12277413>; BBC. (2013, 11 June). *BBC World Service in government funding cut*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22853598>;
- ¹³ Radio Netherlands Worldwide (RNW). (2012, 29 June). *The last day of English broadcasts at RNW*. <http://www.rnw.nl/english/article/last-day-english-broadcasts-rnw>;
- ¹⁴ The US launched Al Hurra in 2004, France 24 started broadcasting in Arabic in 2007, the UK's BBC Arabic launched in 2008, China added Arabic broadcasting in 2009 (The Guardian. (2009, 26 July). *China launches Arabic-language TV channel*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/26/china-arabic-tv-channel> and http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/06/challenging-america-how-russia-china-and-other-countries-use-public-diplomacy-to-compete-with-the-us#_ftnref38
- ¹⁵ Painter, J. (2007, Feb). *The Boom in Counter-Hegemonic News Channels: A Case Study of Telesur*. Research paper presented to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University.
- ¹⁶ Cohen, R. et al. (2005). *Who Is in Control?* Brussels, Belgium: Hoelaart for the International Federation of Journalists. p.4.
- ¹⁷ Benson, R., Powers, M. (2011). *Public Media and Political Independence: Lessons for the Future of Journalism from Around the World*. Free Press. <http://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/stn-legacy/public-media-and-political-independence.pdf>

broad audience at the expense of public service values and rural, poor or minority audiences.¹⁸ Especially private news broadcasters (both international and domestic) have turned to entertainment programming to boost ratings.¹⁹

Funding models impact on the financial independence of a news organization.²⁰ The relatively recent demise of many existing media business models has led to a re-evaluation across the industry of where the ‘value’ in media content lies and an increase in government development programs, corporate benefactors and other ‘special interests’ funding or cross-funding media content.²¹ This kind of funding is historically by no means uncommon in international broadcasting, and it may influence actual media content, framing, and the ‘red lines’ which reporters feel unable to cross.²² While larger media companies rely on attracting their own advertisers online, many online intermediaries like Google Ads exist which effectively mean that small online media companies can get by without having to do so. While a large advertiser can threaten independent reporting by a news broadcaster, the advertiser no longer has such powers if the online news service uses an intermediary like Google Ads; but this also means that the media house can no longer control what advertisements are shown.

Organizational ecosystem

International organizations normally play an important role in research, bringing attention to issues, providing support, training, etc. The predominant way these organizations exert influence appears to be through pedagogy.

Most of the more important international and regional institutions dedicated to journalists and journalism continue to be headquartered either in Europe or the United States of America. The majority of the large media donors continue to be located in the West, and are, more often than not, governments.²³ The

¹⁸ Benson, R., Powers, M. (2011). *Public Media and Political Independence: Lessons for the Future of Journalism from Around the World*. Free Press. p.13. <http://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/stn-legacy/public-media-and-political-independence.pdf>.
McQuail, D. (2003). Public Service Broadcasting: Both Free and Accountable. *The Public*, 10/3. p. 27

¹⁹ See for example The Economist. (2012). *Unbiased and Unloved*. <http://www.economist.com/node/21563298>. Van Der Haak, B. et al. (2012). The Future of Journalism: Networked Journalism. *International Journal of Communication*. 6. Karlekar, K., Radsch, C. (2010). Adapting concepts of media freedom to a changing media environment: Incorporating new media and citizen journalism into the Freedom of the Press Index. *ESSACHESS Journal for Communication Studies* 5 (1). See also the chapter in this report on Pluralism in Asia and Western Europe.

²⁰ Chomsky, H. (1988). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Pantheon Books.

²¹ Powers, S. M., Youmans, W. (2012). A New Purpose for International Broadcasting: Subsidizing Deliberative Technologies in Non-transitioning States A New Purpose for International Broadcasting: Subsidizing Deliberative, 8(1). Price, M. E., et al. (2008). New Technologies and International Broadcasting: Reflections on Adaptations and Transformations. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616(1), 150–172.

²² Davies, N. (2009). *Flat Earth news: an award-winning reporter exposes falsehood, distortion and propaganda in the global media*. Great Britain: CPI Cox & Wyman. Karlekar, K., Cook, S. (2009). *Freedom of the Press 2008 – A Global Survey of Media Independence*. Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

²³ Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). (2013, 19 March). *U.S. Government*

International Federation of Journalists is a global union federation of journalists' trade unions, and is one of the more influential bodies, with more than 600,000 members. While some transnational press ethics bodies exist, such as the World Association of Press Councils and the Organization of News Ombudsmen, they do not possess much influence over the larger media. In the global internet intermediary space, a voluntary embryonic self-regulatory system has emerged in the form of the Global Network Initiative. Another relevant development is the publication in 2013 by the European Commission of the "ICT Sector Guide on Implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights".

While there are a number of codes of ethics for journalists and even some for 'online journalists' and bloggers, most transnational news agencies and broadcasters have their own codes. Notably among the larger new agencies and broadcasters, CNN, Xinhua, and CCTV do not appear to publish specific code of ethics online.

Over the past six years, one notable trend is the increase in online training material for journalism. For instance, the BBC has now launched initiatives to provide journalism and social media training to members of local communities, while its 'College of Journalism' website includes resources for the aspiring citizen journalists,²⁴ adding to the online materials and courses offered by ICFJ Anywhere, Poynter Online, Centre for International Media Assistance, European Journalism Centre, the Global Forum for Media Development, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, and others. In 2013, UNESCO began exploring a Global Initiative for Excellence in Journalism Education as a framework to group together and deepen its international work in this area.

Funding for Media: Trends and Strategies. Center for International Media Assistance, p. 6. Myers, M. (2009) *Funding for Media Development by Major Donors Outside the United States.* Center for International Media Assistance.

²⁴ Bradshaw, P. (2011.). *Mapping Digital Media: Social Media and News.* Open Society Foundation. <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/sites/default/files/mapping-digital-media-social-media-and-news-20120119.pdf>