

Independence: global media | unedited version

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World trends in freedom of expression and media development

Global Media Independence

Introduction

Independence of journalists is any day difficult to measure, especially on a global scale. This is more true today than ever before, with the current fluidity of what constitutes ‘the press’ and who ‘journalists’ are due to lowering of barriers to publication with online media, the conversion of some offline publications to online publications, and the free two-way flow of information between the online and offline media. Most of the indicators used to gauge independence by reports such as the IREX MSI (registration and recognition of journalists in a process that is independent of the government; self-regulatory mechanisms; existence of independent media monitoring organisations; existence of trade-unions; etc.) measure at the level of the nation, and none of these traditional measures can be used while gauging the independence of transnational media.

Structural Issues

The systematic study of pan-regional and transnational news media outlets task is now more difficult due to the breakdown of traditional barriers to the dissemination of news. While before the advent of the Internet, it would have been comparatively easier to study international newswire services and satellite news channels, given the growth of the Internet it has become more difficult to separate 'pan-regional and transnational media outlets' from others. While a few years ago, ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ would have been identified primarily by geographic reach of a channel/newspaper/news agency, etc, now it is defined more by the cross-national and cross-regional focus and the linguistic reach of the content. As an example, according to a study performed by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, RT (formerly Russia Today) was the most popular news distributor on YouTube over a period of 15 months from January 2011 to March 2012, managing to supplant more well-established like the BBC, Deutsche Welles, and Voice of America.

While some of the changes cannot yet be called trends, but consolidation and the increase in size of those agencies offering of news as part of a financial package

is noticeable, with Reuters merging with Thomson in 2008, and the financial services company Bloomberg increasing its original news gathering as well as the expansion of Dow Jones. There is also an increase in the influence of relatively newer entrants like Telesur, Al Jazeera, RT, CCTV, and CNC World, while the older, traditional state-backed broadcasters like VOA and BBC World Service (Heil Alan Jr., 2011; Voice of America, 2013; BBC, 2011) have been cutting staff and languages, while still broadcasting in far more languages than any of their competitors. One possible reason for this is that newer entrants like Al Jazeera and RT aggressively use social media to establish themselves, and are often succeeding against their larger competitors. Al Jazeera, for instance, licenses many of its broadcast-quality videos, high-resolution photos, and blog articles under a Creative Commons licence, allowing people to re-use them without requiring permission, with only attribution being required.

As noted above, an important trend is the usage of online social media platforms by news agencies and transnational news outlets. As on June 6, 2013, RT is the most popular news broadcaster on YouTube with 865,644 subscribers. (The BBC doesn't have a dedicated news channel on YouTube, though its general programming attracts more than 1 million subscribers.) Importantly, the most popular social media accounts are the BBC's Breaking News account on Twitter, which has 6,053,980 followers, Xinhua Viewpoint, which has 5,413,895 fans on Sina Weibo (with CCTV News having 4,040,000 fans), Al Jazeera Arabic, which has 3,543,400 'likes' on Facebook, and on YouTube there is a clear lead by RT. This is leading to 'disintermediation' of news agencies, some of whom are increasingly, as the social media statistics of Reuters and AP show, communicating directly with readers and viewers (who become their subscribers) by using social media platforms as intermediaries in addition to their traditional subscribers who are newspapers, television, and radio broadcasters, whose role as intermediaries is on the decline. This 'disintermediation' through the introduction of online intermediaries also creates new potential gatekeepers, each with their own standards (expressed in 'terms of use') for what kinds of speech are acceptable.

Because of the Internet, the existence of community/volunteer-run *global* media outlets is now a possibility, though it is not a dominant practice currently and the landscape is still dominated by corporate and state media. While the Independent Media Centre (IndyMedia) did not become as large or as effective a network as its founders had hoped, it did provide the impetus for much participatory journalism efforts, including Global Voices and Wikinews, which aim to be truly global in their reach. There is also a trend towards co-optation of such participatory news reporting into traditional corporate media, as seen by iReport.com by CNN, in which citizen journalism becomes corporate-mediated (Kperogi, 2011). The usage by journalists of Twitter and other platforms to query readers about stories led to the observation that "news is no longer gathered exclusively by reporters and turned into a story but emerges from an ecosystem in which journalists, sources, readers and viewers exchange information." (The Economist, 2011).

Funding and Capacity

Funding is both needed for financial independence of a news organization and is seen as a threat to independence as it is a central component of the ‘propaganda model’ (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). While larger media companies rely on attracting their own advertisers online, many online intermediaries like Google Ads exist which effectively mean that smaller media companies do not have 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 publication can no longer control what advertisements are shown.

One other 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 journalist (Bradshaw, 2011), 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, and others.

Independence of International News Services

The largest news agencies, newspapers, and news channels are all governed by different models, and there seem to be no systematic studies of the linkage between independence of their reportage and ownership models. 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-backed. All 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 — work within a different framework both legally and in practice. Further, state-owned international news media organizations need to be studied separately according to their medium (as suggested by the finding in China, TV broadcaster CCTV is under far stricter control than official Chinese state news agencies that operate primarily in print) (. Given this, broad trends are difficult to pinpoint. Voice of America (VoA) is widely regarded as a tool of American propaganda (Price, 2002) and 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” (United States International Broadcasting Act, 1994). However, VoA is also legally guaranteed editorial independence (Price, 2002), and a study found the broadcaster to be a credible source of objective news in its Asian news broadcast (Rampal & Adams, 1990). This study went on to point out that perception of objectivity is important for a foreign news service to be seen as credible, and that this may help counter interference from governments. There have not been later studies that would help identifying trends.

At different times, international state-owned networks have been accused of being uncritical of their backing state (including Al Jazeera, Voice of America,

CCTV, and Russia Today); however, there is a lack of good comparative studies in this area, and it is therefore difficult to legitimately criticize these media outlets for any apparent bias at this time, nor is there any material to suggest any specific trends.

Separate from the issue of editorial independence, one thing that may be observed is that the finances of state-owned international broadcasters are often tied to the foreign policy objectives of the state, and thus the independent funding for foreign language broadcasts are often in jeopardy, as can be seen from the cuts faced by both Voice of America and the BBC's World Service in the past decade.

A study of public media in fourteen democratic and developed states suggests that commercial pressures are far more deleterious than partisan political meddling (Benson & Powers, 2011). The institutions of multi-year charters (BBC, SVT) and ownership by an independent trust (SVT) help insulate media outlets from governmental pressures. However, commercial pressures result in the "increasing difficulty of balancing the need to appeal to a broad audience (to justify the license fee) and to uphold public service values such as high-quality programming across multiple genres, in-depth information, promotion of democratic citizenship" (Benson & Powers, 2011: p.13) and provision of "access to and reflection of society in diverse or proportional ways" (McQuail, 2003: 27). However, it would not suffice to address issues of independence of only state-owned international broadcasters. As Aidan White, the General Secretary of the International Federation of Journalists, notes, "the evidence is that the market [...] is too easily subject to political or commercial pressure" (Cohen et al., 2005: p.4) and that "exchanging strict government regulation for corporate control is not true press freedom" (p.4). This seems to hold for CNN, which is struggling with its audience numbers in the USA and has slipped to third place behind Fox News and MSNBC, and is turning to entertainment programming to boost its domestic ratings (The Economist, 2012).

It has been reported that the global financial crisis has "taken a terrible toll on ... newspapers" (The Economist, 2009), but the big newswires, in contrast, "have been staffing up". For example, while the Wall Street Journal cut down on staff, its sister company Dow Jones, a newswire, increased its staff (The Economist, 2009). There has been no systematic study of the effect of the global financial crisis on transnational news outlets, but it is clear that the financial downturn has had an impact; but rather than having a detrimental effect across the board, it appears to have precipitated a complex reshuffling of resources. Research prior to the global financial crisis indicates that cutting of costs has resulted in the major news agencies "becoming more influential than they had ever been" (Paterson, 2005).

Organizational ecosystem

[A list of media organizations and associations is provided in Appendix 1.]

The list provided in Appendix 1 is only an attempt at indexing the most important international and regional institutions dedicated to journalists and journalism. Thus national-level organizations (Albanian Media Institute, Mediacentar Sarajevo, Bahrain Center for Human Rights, etc.), have been left out. However,

a quick inspection of the international organizations listed will show that they are mostly headquartered either in Europe or the United States of America, and the majority of the large donors are also located in the West, and are, more often than not, Western governments. This has not changed much in the recent past, since most of the funding has gone to create and strengthen national-level organizations.

These international organizations normally play an important role in research, bringing attention to issues, providing support, training, etc., but seem to have little norm-setting powers on issues relating to the profession. The predominant way these organizations exert influence appears to be through pedagogy and in the kind of work that UNESCO does.

While some transnational press ethics bodies (such as the World Association of Press Councils and the Organization of News Ombudsmen) exist, they do not possess much influence over the larger press. The 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 there are a number of codes of ethics for journalists, including the International Principles of Professional Ethics in Journalism prepared under the auspices of Unesco, 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 don't seem to publish specific code of ethics online.

Recommendations

Unesco could:

- convene a meeting on code of ethics for bloggers and online journalists
- collate and popularise different online training courses in multiples languages for journalists through its website

Appendix 1

Media Organizations

- Arab Media Centre
- Centre for Freedom of the Media: <http://www.cfom.org.uk/>
- Centre for International Media Assistance: <http://cima.ned.org/>
- Center for International Media Ethics
- Centro de Estudios de Libertad de Expresion y Acceso a la Informacion (www.palermo.edu/cele)
- European Journalism Centre (<http://www.ejc.net/ejc/>)
- Free Press Unlimited (<https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en>)
- Global Forum for Media Development: <http://gfmf.info/>
- International Media Support (<http://www.i-m-s.dk/>)
- International Press Institute <http://www.freemedia.at/about-us/ipi-profile.html>
- Internews
- Investigative News Network (<http://www.investigativenetwork.org/>)

- IREX (<http://www.irex.org/>)
- Media Development Loan Fund
- Media Freedom International: <http://www.mediafreedominternational.org/>
- Media Institute of Southern Africa
- Online News Association
- Strengthening Independent Media: <http://sim.salzburgglobal.org/?q=page/about-sim>
- Wikileaks
- World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers
- World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) (<http://www.amarc.org/>)
- World Press Freedom Committee
- World Press Institute (<http://www.worldpressinstitute.org/>)

Pan-regional and international professional associations for media workers:

- Association for European Journalist (<http://www.aej.org/>)
- Committee to Project Journalists (www.cpj.org)
- Commonwealth Press Union
- Cartoonists Rights Network International (<http://www.cartoonistsrights.org/>)
- Federation of Arab Journalists
- IFEX (formerly International Freedom of Expression Exchange) (<http://ifex.org/>)
- Inter American Press Association (Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa)
- International Association of Broadcasting
- International Association of the Periodical Press
- International Center for Journalists (www.icfj.org)
- International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (<http://www.publicintegrity.org>)
- International Federation of Journalists
- International Journalist's Network (part of ICfJ) (<http://ijnet.org/>)
- International News Safety Institute (<http://www.newssafety.org/>)
- International Press Association (www.internationalpress.com)
- International Press Institute
- International Radio and TV Union
- International Women's Media Foundation
- North American Broadcasters Association
- Online News Association (<http://journalists.org/>)
- Reporters Without Borders: <http://en.rsf.org/>
- World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers: (<http://www.wan-ifra.org/>)
- World Editors Forum (part of WAN) (<http://www.wan-ifra.org/microsites/world-editors-forum>)

Global freedom of expression advocacy groups

- Arabic Network for Human Rights Information
- Article 19 (<http://www.article19.org/>)
- Catholic Media Council (<http://www.cameco.org/>)
- Freedom House

- Global Voices (<http://globalvoicesonline.org/>)
- Human Rights Watch
- Index on Censorship (<http://www.indexoncensorship.org>)
- International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) (<http://www.ifex.org/>)
- International PEN (<http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/>)
- MediaPolicy.org
- PANOS Network

Donors and multilateral organizations

- BBC Media Action
- Ford Foundation
- Freedom of Expression Foundation (<http://www.fritt-ord.no/en/>)
- Hivos (www.hivos.org)
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- Media Development Loan Fund (<http://www.mdlf.org/>)
- OECD
- Open Society Media Program (www.soros.org/initiatives/media) and Information Program (www.soros.org/initiatives/ip)
- Sigrid Rausing Trust (<http://www.sigrid-rausing-trust.org/>)
- UNDP
- UNESCO
- USAID, EuropeAid (European Commission, DG Development), AusAID, CIDA, Sida, Norad, JICA, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, DANIDA, UK DFID.
- World Bank Institute

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