

# Independence: global media | print version

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World trends in freedom of expression and media development

## **Independence: global media**

### **Overview**

Independence of journalists and of media outlets has continued to be dynamic and uneven around the world, and has become increasingly challenged by the fluidity of what constitutes ‘media’ and the application online of ‘press freedom,’ and by who count as ‘journalists’ due to lowering of production and dissemination barriers by online media, the conversion of some off-line publications to online publications, and the two-way flow of information between the online and traditional media. Changes to existing business models for global and transnational media have led to an increased reliance on state funding, which has been closely associated with risks of overt dependence and governmental ‘capture.’

### **Independence of international news services**

The largest news agencies, newspapers, and news channels have all been governed by different models although there has been a trend towards state-owned international media since 2006 and online volunteer news collectives [see Pluralism: Global]. Among the models are Agence France-Presse, which is owned by the State and media professionals, the Spanish-language Agencia EFE that is privately owned, Associated Press collectively owned by its subscribers, Bloomberg privately owned, Reuters privately owned (since 2008 as part of Thomson Reuters), and Xinhua which is state-owned. Different degrees of editorial independence from owners have been operational within these media companies. Within the state-owned global news broadcasters – the larger ones being Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, BBC (via a trust), CCTV, China Radio International, Deutsche Welle, France24, RT (formerly Russia Today), and Voice of America (VOA) – there have been different frameworks both legally and in practice, as well as by platform. Given this range, broad trends have been difficult to pinpoint, although it has been observed that the performance of international broadcasting has been related to complexities of foreign policy and their relationship to the geopolitical environment. As such, some international and foreign broadcasting has tended to reflect the interests of the respective governments. The reliance on government funding by many

international broadcasters has raised questions about their ability to provide neutral and impartial reporting. Public institutions with multi-year charters and ownership by an independent trust (BBC, SVT) have helped insulate some global media outlets from governmental pressures.<sup>1</sup> In another case, outlets have been legally guaranteed editorial independence and statutes have set out the government's policies conduct, with audiences perceiving the news as credible. Audience perceptions are important if a foreign news service is to be seen as credible, and this factor has been seen to counterbalance some of the influence from governments. At different times, some international state-owned networks have been accused of avoiding stories that are critical of their backing State; however, there has been a lack of comparative studies in this area, and it is difficult to confirm alleged bias with detailed evidence, nor is there sufficient material to suggest specific trends.

Internationally, political influence and commercial pressure have been seen at times also to have compromised independence in both domestic and international media. Corporate ownership, as distinct from state-ownership and strict government regulation, is not a guarantee of editorial independence. A 2011 study by two scholars at New York University of public media in 14 developed countries suggested that commercial pressures have been far more deleterious there than partisan political meddling. Commercial pressures have impacted also on state-owned media, encouraging these outlets to appeal to a middle-class urban audience, potentially at the expense of public service values and rural, poor or minority audiences. Private news broadcasters (both international and domestic) especially have turned to entertainment programming to boost ratings.

Global media independence of a news organization has been impacted upon by the relatively recent demise of many existing media business models, leading to a re-evaluation across the industry of where the 'value' in media content lies and an increase in government development programmes, corporate benefactors and other 'special interests' funding or cross-funding media content. This kind of funding has by no means been uncommon historically in international broadcasting, and it may influence actual media content, framing, and the 'red lines' that reporters feel unable to cross.

While larger media companies have relied on attracting their own advertisers online, many online intermediaries like Google Ads now exist, which effectively has meant that small online media companies can get by without having to have dedicated facilities. While a large advertiser can threaten independent reporting by a news organization, the advertiser loses this leverage if the online news service uses an intermediary; but this has also meant that the organization concerned can no longer control what advertisements are shown.

## **Professionalism and the broader media ecosystem**

International governmental and non-governmental organizations have generally played an important role in media research, bringing attention to issues, and

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<sup>1</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Sveriges Television (SVT) are the British and Swedish, respectively, public service broadcasters.

providing support, training, etc. Their activities contribute to a global environment for independence. The International Federation of Journalists, a global federation of journalists' trade unions, has been one of the more influential professional bodies, with more than 600,000 members.<sup>2</sup> While some transnational press ethics bodies have existed, such as the World Association of Press Councils and the Organization of News Ombudsmen (which concerns self-regulation at an enterprise-level), they have not appeared to exert much influence over the larger media.<sup>3</sup> Most of the more influential international and regional institutions dedicated to journalists and journalism have continued to be headquartered either in Europe or North America. In the global internet intermediary space, a voluntary embryonic self-regulatory system has emerged in the form of the Global Network Initiative.<sup>4</sup> Another relevant development that appears indicative of the trend towards self-regulation at this level was the European Commission's 2013 publication ICT Sector Guide on Implementing the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The majority of the large media donors have also continued to be located in the West, and were, more often than not, governments.

While there have been a number of codes of ethics for journalists that aspire to universal status, and even some for 'online journalists' and bloggers, most transnational news agencies and broadcasters have had their own codes. Notably among the larger news agencies and broadcasters, Al Arabiya, CCTV, CNN, and Xinhua have not appeared to publish specific codes of ethics online.

Over the past six years, one notable trend has been the increase in online training material for journalism. For instance, UNESCO has published extensive guides for journalists on a range of topics from conflict-sensitive reporting to investigative reporting and produced online curricula, including a model curricula for journalism education and an online media and information literacy course. In 2013, UNESCO began exploring with ORBICOM, the network of UNESCO chairs in communication, a Global Initiative for Excellence in Journalism Education, as a framework to group together and deepen international work in this area. The BBC has launched initiatives to provide journalism and social media training to members of local communities, while its 'College of Journalism' website includes resources for aspiring citizen journalists. Such initiatives add to the online materials and courses offered by the Centre for International Media Assistance, the European Journalism Centre, International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) Anywhere, Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, Poynter Online, and others.

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<sup>2</sup> IFJ's headquarters are in Belgium.

<sup>3</sup> WAPC's headquarters are in Turkey and ONO's headquarters are in Canada.

<sup>4</sup> GNI's headquarters are in the USA.