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The Roles of the News Media in the Governance Agenda: Watch-dogs, Agenda-Setters, and Gate-keepers.

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Synopsis:

To consider the role of the independent news media, this chapter outlines the normative framework and the core concepts guiding the report, and then sets out the road-plan for volume. There are many rival normative standards available for evaluating how well the news media functions in a democracy, as well as varying perceptions about the way that journalists and broadcasters should see and do their jobs. Working within the broader notion of the public sphere, it is proposed that the news media should act as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers. Through fulfilling each of these roles, as an institution the news media maximizes opportunities for critical reflection and rational deliberation in the public sphere, for inclusive participation in communication processes, and ultimately for informed choice and human development in society. The reasons why the news media fails to fulfill these roles relate to restrictions arising from the state, markets, and the profession. Subsequent chapters evaluate the roles of the news media in a wide variety of contexts and countries, the major constraints and challenges which prevent journalism from fulfilling these ideal roles, and the most effective policy interventions available to strengthen the contribution of the news media to both democratic governance and human development.

Paper 1.1 in The Role of the News Media in the Governance Reform Agenda

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THE ROLES OF THE NEWS MEDIA IN THE GOVERNANCE AGENDA:**WATCH-DOGS, AGENDA-SETTERS, AND GATE-KEEPERS**

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In 2000 the world's leaders came together at the UN and pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, a series of specific targets, including halving extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, improving child mortality and maternal health, and promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. Yet in 2008, at the mid-point towards the target date, it is evident that the current pace of change will not be sufficient to achieve these goals by 2015.¹ Many countries have made remarkable progress in lifting millions out of extreme poverty, fuelled in particular by emerging economies in Asia. The countries where the development goals are being met most successfully show that good governance is one of the critical factors, combined with resource mobilization and donor support, technical know-how and south-south cooperation, effective national and local planning, and investment in institutional and individual capacity development. Nevertheless most low-income countries will fail to achieve their national targets. States in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially those emerging from recent conflict, face multiple challenges. Climate change, the deterioration of the global economy, and renewed threats to food security, also pose additional difficulties in meeting these goals.² Moreover since the early 1970s, following the 'third wave' of democracy, although many states worldwide have now held multiparty elections, by many indicators the further advance of democratic governance has stagnated, or even reversed, during the first decade of the 21st century.³ Contemporary challenges facing all democracies include expanding and deepening opportunities for inclusive public participation in civil society, ensuring the responsiveness, transparency, and accountability of government institutions, and strengthening the overarching framework of fundamental freedoms and internationally-agreed standards of human rights.

In this context, what are the roles of the independent news media? The free press is commonly valued as a core sector of civil society for multiple reasons. People with more timely and accurate information are empowered to make better choices. For governance, the two-way flow of information is the central conduit connecting citizens and the state. Without transparency about the performance of the government and the policies offered by parties and candidates contending for elected office, and without alternative sources of information about this process, the act of casting a vote becomes meaningless and elected officials and parties cannot be held to account.⁴ The independent news media has been regarded as particularly important for promoting government transparency and accountability, especially by highlighting cases of corruption and misconduct.⁵ Elected leaders also require accurate news about public concerns to be responsive to social needs and development challenges.⁶

The independent news media is also critical for human development. Communication is the life-blood of economic markets; it facilitates trade, transmits ideas, and diffuses innovations, thus promoting growth. Information can improve the delivery of public services, forewarn against natural disasters, spread education and knowledge, and reduce preventable health risks.⁷ News helps inform the general public, donor agencies, and the international development community about severe challenges facing low-income states and the urgent humanitarian crisis arising from natural and man-made disasters.⁸ The global flow of information across national borders is also essential for international understanding and peace; lack of information and awareness about other communities, cultures, and viewpoints can fuel social intolerance, erode trust, and lead towards conflict.⁹ Reporting conveys diplomatic signals between nations and shapes domestic perceptions about foreign countries.¹⁰ Countries with both widespread media access and an independent free press have been found to experience lower corruption, greater administrative efficiency, higher political stability and more effective rule of law, as well as better developmental outcomes, such as lower infant mortality rates and greater literacy.¹¹

Information arises from direct personal contact with family, friends, and colleagues, in daily interactions within the local community, the workplace, and the neighborhood. For those with access, information today also flows increasingly from person-to-person electronic communications, via mobile

cellular and fixed line telephony, emails and text messaging. With the growing diffusion of information and communication technologies, however, information, especially about our own and other societies, also flows to us increasingly through the mass media. This information is transmitted via diverse channels: terrestrial, cable and satellite television, national, regional and community radio stations, feature films and documentaries, DVDs and video games, books, newspapers and magazines, advertising bill-boards and commercials, the music industry and the audiovisual arts, as well as the digital world of the internet, websites, online YouTube videos, I-pod players, podcasts, wikis, and blogs.

Among all these channels, the value of independent news media, functioning as a conduit for timely and accurate information, is widely acknowledged as vital for democracy and development. Yet in many places, independent journalists, commentators, and broadcasters continue to face severe restrictions on what can be reported. Practices of official censorship, state monopolies of the major airwaves, and threats of imprisonment, deportation, or physical intimidation for independent journalists, have been used to silence public criticism of the authorities. Moreover, in some states, journalists and reporters see their primary role as being loyal to the rich and powerful, where their main function is to serve as the mouthpiece for established interests. In this regard, journalists become public relations channels for the uncritical transmission of official messages to the public. Fundamental freedoms of expression and publication are restricted by many autocracies. In this context, the news media cannot 'speak truth to power' and thereby strengthen accountable and transparent governance, nor can journalism provide a channel connecting citizens and the state.

To consider the role of the independent news media, this chapter outlines the normative framework and the core concepts guiding the report, and then sets out the road-plan for volume. Subsequent chapters evaluate the roles of the news media in a wide variety of contexts and countries, the major constraints and challenges which prevent journalism from fulfilling these ideal roles, and the most effective policy interventions available to strengthen the contribution of the news media to both democratic governance and human development.

The idea of a democratic public sphere

To help understand these issues, we can turn to the concept of the democratic public sphere, an idea with a pedigree both ancient and impeccable. At the heart of the public sphere is the *agora*, the main political, civic, religious, and commercial center of the ancient Greek city. It was here that citizens traded goods, information, concepts, and ideas to better their situations and impact the powers that governed them, thus improving the quality of their own lives. In political philosophy, the agora has come to be known variously as the public arena, the public realm, the public domain or the public sphere. The notion of the public sphere has appeared in a variety of writings during the twentieth century, including Walter Lippman, Hannah Arendt and John Dewey, although it is probably most widely known today from the works of Jurgen Habermas.¹²

As a normative vision, and for the purposes of this discussion, the democratic public sphere represents that space between the state and the household where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to deliberate upon common concerns, and to cooperate and collaborate on solutions to social problems. For Habermas, the ideal public space facilitated reasoned deliberation, critical discussion, and tolerance of alternative arguments and viewpoints. He theorized that a public sphere which strengthens deliberative democracy requires at least three minimal conditions. First, it depends upon the quality of informed discourse and thus processes of interpersonal and mediated communications. Newspapers and magazines, radio and television news, books and pamphlets, and more recently the Internet and new information and communication technologies, are the essential conduits for timely and accurate communications about public events and issues in modern societies. It also depends, secondly, upon the quality of inclusive and equal participation, as diverse arenas should

be open to all citizens and viewpoints in any society, without excluding any sector. The notion emphasizes the role of public engagement in a variety of deliberative forums – town hall and village meetings, community gatherings, local party branch assemblies, election hustings, social audits, neighborhood clubs, workshops and seminars, religious congregations, trade union, NGO and cooperative associations - with the growth of mass literacy and access to mass communications expanding opportunities for informed discourse. Lastly, securing the democratic integrity of the public sphere also requires the unrestricted flow of information and the constitutional or legal guarantee of basic civil liberties, including respect for the rights to free expression, argument, association, debate and discussion. In this regards, the notion reflects Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” These claims are embodied in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which prohibits Congress from passing laws that abridge freedom of the press. Similar rights are embodied in many other constitutions around the world, as well as in the growing body of Freedom of Information laws and statutes.

The democratic public sphere helps to promote governance which is accountable to citizens and responsive to human needs. Informed citizens can match their policy preferences against the political choices available in an election. Truly inclusive, participatory democratic governance is thus the best security against misrule. Based on this normative vision, the following characteristics of a democratic public sphere emerge (visually depicted in Figure 1):

- A pluralistic communications system functions where the news media are independent from state control, official censorship, and legal restrictions, reflecting diverse perspectives, social sectors, interests, and political persuasions.
- Constitutionally or legally guaranteed civil liberties and political rights exist, especially the fundamental freedom of expression, opinion, information, and assembly, as well as open and transparent governance.
- A rich and robust civil society flourishes with multiple organizations and diverse associations facilitating unrestricted deliberation, cooperation, and collaboration on issues of common concern.
- All people enjoy equal access to the public sphere, enabling opportunities for expression and participation, especially for women, young people, and marginalized sectors of society.

[Figure 1 about here]

It is reasonable to acknowledge that, measured against these normative criteria, no single country serves as a perfect example of the democratic public sphere. But this holds true for all the other outcomes in the governance agenda, such as responsive and accountable public service providers and meritocratic civil service systems.

The ideal standards for the roles of the news media

Within the many components of the public sphere, this project focuses upon the first, namely the challenges facing the development of communications systems and, in particular, the contribution of the independent news media towards strengthening democratic governance and human development. In complex modern societies, the existence of the independent news media can be regarded as a necessary, although not sufficient, condition to guarantee a lively and effective public sphere. There are many rival normative standards available for evaluating how well the news media functions in a democracy, as well as varying perceptions about the way that journalists and broadcasters

should see and do their jobs, even within and among relatively similar established democracies.¹³ This report focuses upon the roles of journalists and reporters as watchdogs, gate-keepers and agenda-setters. 'Roles' are understood as a set of expectations governing the behavior of persons and institutions holding a particular function in society; a set of norms, values and standards that defines how persons and institutions should and do work. Roles therefore have both normative and empirical dimensions. Understanding roles requires a clear vision of the idea of democratic governance and the public sphere, the ideal context within which journalists operate, providing the benchmark to evaluate their actual performance.

Roles operate at both individual and collective levels. At *individual-level*, roles determine the norms and values, standards of behavior, and orientations shaping the job of journalists. This category is understood broadly within this report to include a diverse range of professional occupations in communications, including writers, reporters and journalists, broadcasters and news anchors, editors and producers, analysts, experts, and commentators, press officers, public relations and market research practitioners, official spokespersons, as well as internet communicators such as web-editors and online bloggers. Journalistic roles are learnt from many sources, including from personal background and experiences, professional education, apprenticeship training, observation of media routines and practices, guidance from employers and co-workers, formal guidelines and standards of professional conduct, practical job experience, organizational structures, and the incentives in the workplace.¹⁴ Interventions designed to strengthen the individual roles of journalists commonly focus upon establishing formal guidelines, expanding the institutional capacity of professional bodies and organizations, such as press councils and communication education institutes, as well as supporting capacity-building through individual journalist training programs and workshops.

At *collective level*, roles determine the institutional practices, cultural values and norms, and the routines of particular news outlets, media sectors, the communication system within any society, or even the broader functions of the global media. In this regard, we can compare, for example, the role of community radio with that of the local press, or the role of BBC World News in global news compared with CNN International. Individual roles are embedded within this broader institutional context. The collective roles of the news media are arguably more important for the health of democratic governance and for human development than the individual role of journalists. For instance, effective democracies require a diversity of social and political viewpoints heard across all the airwaves and newspapers within any society, and this is more vital rather than the need for impartial balance established by each media outlet, individual reporter, or particular story. Interventions designed to strengthen the role of the news media as an institution focus more broadly on the role of the state, markets and the journalistic profession, for example by strengthening rights to freedom of information, expression and publication in law, by deregulating state ownership of broadcasting to facilitate a plurality of independent channels, by investing in the infrastructure supporting diverse community radio stations, newspapers, and websites, or by reforming professional journalistic training and accreditation bodies.

Most of the research literature seeking to understand and describe the roles of journalists has focused on the individual level, gathering survey data which can then be aggregated upwards to study particular sectors (for example the roles of print versus broadcast reporters), or even national journalistic cultures.¹⁵ Surveys of representative samples of individual journalists have now been conducted in a wide range of countries and this approach is currently being expanded worldwide.¹⁶ Professional routines, editorial procedures, and socialization processes for journalists have been examined through this method in many post-industrial societies and established democracies, such as Germany, the United States, Britain and Italy.¹⁷ This approach has also been extended to low and

middle-income countries as diverse as Brazil, Indonesia, Russia, China, Egypt, Bangladesh, Nepal and Tanzania.¹⁸

The results of this work broadly suggest that news professionals perceive themselves as serving multiple functions and roles, for instance in the priority they give to providing background analysis and interpretation of events, to facilitating public debate and expression, and to delivering timely factual coverage of events. The broadest comparison of news cultures to date, by Weaver and Wu, based on the results of surveys of journalists conducted in twenty countries, concluding that the traditional ideals of objectivity and impartiality dominate many newsrooms across the globe, although there were important cross-cultural variations in role perceptions.¹⁹ There are continuing debates about whether reporters should strive to be neutral observers of events, prioritizing principles such as objectivity, neutrality, fairness, detachment and impartiality, or whether they should seek to be advocates adopting a more active and committed role seeking to promote social change on behalf of the disadvantaged or a particular group, viewpoint, or political party. Roles also vary in how far journalists regard themselves as adversaries to those in power – serving as the fourth estate to counterbalance the other branches of government – or how far they should be loyal spokespersons of the authorities. There are also different perceptions about how far journalists regard themselves as servants of the public interest, providing information which helps informed citizens to govern themselves, for example by emphasizing coverage of public affairs, economics, and foreign policy, and how far they see themselves as providing what the audience demands, for example by focusing upon popular life-style, celebrity culture, and entertainment stories.

The different perceptions which journalists actually perceive have been classified and described through the growing range of empirical studies, but this classification of roles has been only weakly related to, or embodied within, broader normative or prescriptive theories about democratic governance and human development. Not all journalistic roles have equally positive consequences for the quality of democratic governance and human development. For example, journalists in some countries may see their primary responsibilities as acting as loyal spokespersons for government authorities, rarely questioning official information, and providing extensive coverage of ruling elites, dignitaries, and leaders. In this regard, the news media may serve as an effective propaganda machine for autocracies, reinforcing the hegemonic control of the powerful, rather than providing a counter-veiling force and a diversity of viewpoints. Reports may also fail to reflect the voice of the politically-marginalized, women, and poor. Commercial pressures may mean that journalists focus on providing ‘soft’ news which drives newspaper sales, giving little sustained attention to major challenges of social development, natural disasters, international news, or dramatic failures of public policy. From a normative perspective, the notion of journalistic roles can only provide a prescriptive benchmark if it is embedded within broader theories of democratic governance and human development. Moreover, although many alternative role perceptions have been identified, it is preferable to focus upon a more limited range in this report. This process helps to develop clear conceptual framework, reliable and unambiguous empirical indicators and benchmarks, and consistent comparisons across countries and sectors.

Working within the wider framework of the notion of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, the report advocates that the core responsibilities of the news media should be understood to involve, at a minimum, their individual and collective roles as watch-dogs, agenda-setters, and gate-keepers. Through fulfilling each of these roles, as an institution the news media maximizes opportunities for critical reflection and rational deliberation in the public sphere, for inclusive participation in communication processes, and ultimately for informed choice and human development in society. We advocate that as ‘*watch-dogs*’, the news media has a responsibility to help guard the public interest,

ensuring the accountability of powerful decision-makers by highlighting cases of malfeasance, misadministration, and corruption, thereby strengthening the transparency and effectiveness of governance. As *'agenda-setters'*, the news media has a responsibility to raise awareness of pervasive social problems, helping to inform governing officials about social needs and to inform the international community about development challenges. As *'gate-keepers'*, the news media has a responsibility to reflect and incorporate the plurality of viewpoints and political persuasions in reporting, to maximize the diversity of perspectives and arguments heard in rational public deliberations and to enrich the public sphere. Many other functions can be suggested, but these triple roles can be regarded as the necessary, but not sufficient, collective responsibilities of the news media for the health of democratic governance and human development. These roles are challenging to achieve effectively in every society, but they are particularly difficult in many transitional and consolidating democracies, where the structure of the news media is often in transition and where reporters are learning new roles and adapting to changed conditions.²⁰ There are many barriers which restrict the role of individual journalists and the collective news media as an institution from achieving these democratic ideals, of which the most important arise from limits due to the state, the market and the profession.

Watch-dogs

As *'watch-dogs'*, it is argued that the news media should serve democracy by providing a check and balance on powerful sectors of society, including leaders within the public and private domains.²¹ This represents the classic notion of the news media as the fourth estate, counter-balancing the power of the executive, legislature and judiciary branches. According to this well-known ideal, the news media should keep a skeptical eye on the powerful, guarding the public interest and protecting it from incompetence, corruption and misinformation. The *'watch-dog'* role for reporters is sufficiently broad, fluid, and open to encompass both a more neutral function as an even-handed disseminator of information about public affairs which was previously hidden from public attention, as well as a more active role as an investigator of the behavior of decision-makers, or even an adversary of the powerful.²²

The defining feature of watch-dog journalism is not the political stance of the reporter, story, or media outlet, but rather the role of asking hard or probing questions of the powerful to maximize transparency and to serve the public interest. On a routine basis, timely and accurate information provided by news coverage of public affairs should help citizens to evaluate the performance of political leaders and parties, for example the government record in reducing poverty or improving economic growth. Investigative reporting commonly highlights failures in government, especially those arising from cases of bribery, corruption, and malfeasance, from abuse of power, or from incompetent management of public service delivery. Through this process, journalists should help to encourage and promote government transparency and accountability, especially by facilitating more informed choices by voters during elections. Reporters investigate claims made by public officials and scrutinize the action of corporate elites, irrespective of the party in power, economic advantage, or personal biases, to advance the broader public interest. The media can give whistleblowers a voice, spearhead the downfall of powerful politicians, and expose widespread corporate corruption. Public disclosure, while not sufficient by itself to stamp out these problems, is the sunshine which can act as a disinfectant to eradicate cases of corruption, to bring government misconduct to the attention of the electorate and the courts, and to deter others from similar behavior. The notion of reporters as watchdogs is one widely subscribed to by journalists in many democratic states, as confirmed by surveys of journalists in Sweden, the United States and Britain.²³

Agenda-setters

Watch-dog journalism can be closely related to agenda-setting, by investigating or asking hard questions about previously-obscure problems, and thereby highlighting these issues in the news

headlines, although these roles remain conceptually distinct. As an *'agenda-setter'*, it is claimed that the news media should function to raise awareness of social problems, especially highlighting vital issues such as major disasters, development challenges, or humanitarian crisis that require urgent action. The term *'agenda-setting'* originated with work by McCombs and Shaw during the early-1970s, and the theory proposed by these authors has subsequently been applied by many studies to multiple issues and countries in an extensive body of literature developed over more than three decades.²⁴ The central normative premise of agenda-setting theory is the claim that problems covered in the news media should serve to highlight the importance of these issues for the public and for politicians. In this regard, it is claimed that the press should operate like a burglar-alarm, sounding alarm warnings and rousing people to action when major challenges and crisis arise.

Coverage of these issues in the news media can inform the general public and government officials, potentially making people more responsive to social needs, humanitarian crisis, and development priorities, both at home and overseas.²⁵ This process is thought to be particularly important for ensuring that governments react swiftly and effectively to natural and humanitarian crisis. Hence Amartya Sen's famous claim that famines do not occur in functioning democracies because their leaders must be more responsive to the demands of the citizens, or they face the risk of losing office, while coverage of local issues in the free press connects elected representatives more closely with the needs of their constituents.²⁶ By contrast, autocracies which strictly control the press, such as the military junta in Burma, lack such feedback mechanisms, as well as the need to be responsive to natural disasters in order to retain their grip on power.

In practice, however, there remains considerable dispute about the primary direction of influence in this complex dance, including who leads and who follows among the news agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda.²⁷ In the strongest version of this thesis, the news media are seen as exerting an independent impact upon the concerns of the public and elites. In the United States, for example, studies report that the president and congress often respond to headline stories featured in the news media.²⁸ Alternative versions emphasize a process of mutual interaction, where reporters are serving to link the priorities of citizens and elected officials (an important but less autonomous role). Weaker theories suggest a more passive role, where the news agenda usually simply reflects and follows pre-existing public and elite priorities, as well as unfolding world events. Agenda-setting by reporters may arise from conscious editorial decisions in newsrooms, for example by the CBS program *'Sixty Minutes'* to break the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse story in April 2004, or from common practices and organizational structures in media outlets. The process thereby calls attention to issues of concern among the general public and government officials. The news media are also believed to contribute towards framing issues, where reporting triggers familiar interpretive frameworks shaping how we think about social problems and their potential solutions.²⁹

Gate-keepers

Lastly, as *'gate-keepers'*, or indeed as *'gate-openers'*, it is argued that the news media should serve as the classical agora where journalists and broadcasters bring together a plurality of diverse interests, political parties, viewpoints, and social sectors to debate issues of public concern. The idea of *'gate-keeping'* was first applied to the news media by White in the early 1950s.³⁰ The notion has been widely used to describe the general process of selection in media work, whether micro-level editorial decisions about the choice of headline topics, images, or specific stories which are carried, or the broader macro-level balance of voices, parties, and interests which are represented as sources, authoritative spokespersons, or leaders in news coverage.

In this report, the focus is upon the institutional role of the news media and its responsibility to provide inclusive opportunities for participation and voice. Coverage in the news media should reflect

diverse perspectives, viewpoints, issues, and interests chosen from across the political and social spectrum, including from politically-marginalized and poorer sectors of society. Balanced and inclusive coverage among a pluralistic range of independent news media sources is also particularly important for encouraging a vital and lively rational deliberative process, representing all political persuasions and viewpoints. This process is perhaps most critical in post-conflict states and deeply divided societies, as a way of encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and interaction among diverse communities, reducing the underlying causes of conflict and building the conditions for a lasting peace. The representation of women, the poor, and marginalized and politically-excluded groups in news coverage is vital in this process, so that all voices and perspectives are heard in communication processes and within the public sphere. Balanced coverage of all political parties and issues across the news media is also particularly important during election campaigns, to provide the basis for informed choice among citizens. Where media gate-keepers consistently exclude certain voices or interests, favoring the powerful or incumbent office-holders and governing parties, this stifles public debate and reduces the quality of democracy.

Limits on the roles of journalists

Although not without challenge, these ideals are widely advocated as the minimal standards by which the news media should function to strengthen democratic governance and human development. In practice, however, numerous factors can limit the effectiveness and capacity of the news media to meet these standards and many obstacles, discussed throughout this report, prevent them from serving the broader public interest through these roles. As subsequent chapters explore, the state, markets, professional bodies and the national culture can limit the effectiveness of the watch-dog, agenda-setting and gate-keeping roles of the news media. Figure 2 illustrates these constraints.

[Figure 2 about here]

The role of the *state* may be particularly important. A wide range of constitutional and legal restrictions curtail freedom of expression and publication, including stringent libel laws and restrictive official secrets acts, which severely curtail how reporters can act. Human rights watch agencies and organizations concerned to protect press freedom regularly document cases of outright violence, imprisonment, and intimidation used against journalists and broadcasters, which have been commonly employed to shut down newspapers and to silence critical voices.³¹ States also continue to use the techniques of official propaganda and censorship, while state monopolies of radio and television channels, and the policy framework regulating publication, broadcasting and telecommunications, can limit a plurality of voices on the airwaves. Freedom of expression for investigative journalism can also be restricted by requirements for registration or licenses for journalists or newspapers; by denial of travel visas for foreign reporters or by banning journalists abroad; broadcasting regulations and laws governing broadcasting contents; and a legal framework governing official secrecy or freedom of information, intellectual property, libel, and taxation. Where the interests of the news media are too closely aligned with the powerful or affluent, the press can fail to be sufficiently independent or critical watchdogs serving the broader public interest. Investigative reporters encounter major problems of scrutinizing decisions where official information is tightly controlled or where press freedom is limited through regulation or state censorship.

Markets can also fail in societies with severely-limited competition through heavily regulated oligopolies in commercial ownership, particularly over-concentration of ownership of the airwaves. Commercial pressures may also undermine the capacity of the news media to fulfill these functions, where a concern about the market for news leads to an emphasis on soft news dominated by entertainment, celebrity culture and trivia, rather than serious coverage of public affairs serving the broader interest. The roles of journalists can be restricted by the economic market for news, including the structure, resources, and ownership of the mass media, especially the patterns of state-owned,

public service, and commercial television, the availability of community radio and other local media outlets, the diversity of ownership of the print sector, levels of public access to the mass media and to newer information and communication technologies, and the role of global news flows and the permeability of cultural trade across national borders.

Roles are also predicted to be shaped by the *profession*, especially by standards of training, entry, and accreditation of reporters and broadcasters, by organizational routines, the composition and social diversity of newsrooms, and by the role of professional bodies, such as journalism associations, trade unions, and press councils. These are influenced by the broader context of values and norms embedded in the national cultures of journalism.³² Journalists may reject the legitimacy of the roles of the press as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers, if these are regarded as 'Western' notions which fail to reflect national cultures. The news media may thereby exercise a form of self-censorship, if it is widely believed that reporters should play a role which is more loyally supportive of autocratic leaders, predominant parties, or affluent business elites.

The precise impact of each of these factors – the market, the state, and the profession – on the quality of journalism has generated an extensive debate and research literature in the field of media and development. Where there are serious problems of performance in meeting these ideal roles, then the report concludes that a range of programmatic interventions are available, designed to strengthen both individual and institutional capacity. Understanding which programs work best, and integrating these interventions into the core work of the development community, is critical both to strengthen the quality of democratic governance as well as to improve development outcomes. We need to understand the barriers which exist to how far the news media can meet these functions, and the policy interventions which can be most effective in strengthening free, plural and independent communication systems as a core component of democratic governance. Such a system is regarded as intrinsically valuable, as well as also serving several important functions for strengthening other aspects of good governance and human development, including the transparency, accountability, and responsiveness of elected officials to the public.

New initiatives designed to strengthen the roles of the news media also require attention to a broader range of issues beyond journalism. Donors may typically think about the elements of the public sphere individually – such as building an independent media sector, strengthening civil society, or supporting freedom of information legislation. Operationally and conceptually, these are treated as separate programs; in the field, different NGOs may be responsible for the separate pieces of work. Because of this, the connective fiber among these programs remains unrealized in practice, potentially leading to lost synergies, missed opportunities, diminished impact and even negative outcomes.

This phenomenon can be illuminated by examining it in the context of a particular arena of the governance agenda. Take anti-corruption programming, for instance. During anti-corruption program design, the elements of the public sphere are treated separately: for example, passing freedom of information legislation may be an important program component, but is designed and carried out in isolation from other elements of the public sphere. What is missed is the interaction between that legislation and the media sector's capacity to understand and use it, as well as interaction between the legislation and the broader political culture within the country, which may or may not encourage robust debate and criticism of government. Investigative journalism programming may also be a separate part of the anti-corruption agenda, but is generally viewed in isolation from all of the above, not to mention from programs to address the capacity of government ombudsmen/watchdogs to effectively act upon stories of corruption that are broken in the press. By scrutinizing the connective tissue between these discrete programs, we begin to grasp the importance of the public sphere as a conceptual framework for the governance agenda.

Road map of the report

[Note: To be revised to reflect the contents of the final report]

Subsequent chapters examine how the news media functions in practice against these benchmarks, using systematic cross-national empirical analysis, as well as detailed selected case studies derived from a wide range of low and medium income societies as well as different types of regimes found in all regions around the globe.

To examine these issues, *Chapter 2* turns to the available indicators and metrics available to measure how well the news media meets these functions. Systematic performance indicators and benchmarks, evaluating how well the news media functions are becoming more widely available.³³ The chapter considers a range of important issues. What evidence and what diagnostic tools are available to compare how effectively journalists are performing in their roles as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers in different societies? How are the core components of media freedom monitored and operationalized by alternative quantitative indices, based on 'expert' judgments, and are these measures valid, robust, accurate, and reliable? Do new measures and methodologies need to be developed and additional sources of data gathered? What do the available indices suggest about the functions of the news media, including cross-national comparisons worldwide and also evidence of trends over time? And can the indices be transformed into typologies and classifications for comparing these roles?

Chapter 3 then examines evidence for the role of journalists in agenda-setting, particularly how far the news media raises awareness of social needs and development challenges. Agenda-setting emphasizes the importance of certain problems in news headlines and thereby prioritizing issues of concern. The process also involves framing: triggering interpretive frameworks shaping how to think about social problems and their potential solutions. Does this function thereby strengthen government responsiveness to social problems arising from natural crisis and disasters, such as famines, floods and pandemics? This is the well-known claim of the eminent economist Amartya Sen.³⁴ Under what conditions does the news media succeed, and fail, in their agenda-setting role when covering natural crisis and disasters? The process of agenda setting is not simply about making national governments responsive to domestic social needs; it also involves the priorities facing the international development community and donor partners. *Chapter 4* considers how far the international news media highlights coverage of natural and manmade humanitarian disasters in developing countries overseas, and how far this process thereby heightens concern in public concern and encourages the responsiveness of donor governments in sponsoring humanitarian aid and technical assistance.

Chapter 5 considers the 'watchdog' role of journalism which holds powerful public officials and institutions responsible for their decision and actions. Watch-dog journalism should be particularly important when highlighting problems of corruption, malfeasance, cronyism, and scandal in government, thereby raising standards in public life and limiting the abuse of public office. But how active are journalists in reporting these sorts of stories in many developing countries, and does reporting which focuses too aggressively on exposing the personal and private life of public figures thereby contribute towards public cynicism and deter future leaders from dedicating themselves to a career in public service? Extending this theme, *Chapter 6* considers whether news coverage of government performance contributes towards a more informed public. One of the critical roles of journalists is to report how well the government performs in delivering basic public services, such as health care and schooling, as well as providing broader indicators of government effectiveness, such as on economic growth and foreign policy. Through processes of framing and priming, and by providing a wide range of expert evaluations, the news media provide a prism which the public can use to assess public officials and understand public policy debates, promoting government transparency and accountability. But

such reporting can be fall sort of the ideal standards for many reasons, even in democracies with high levels of press freedom, for example where reporting fails to engage in substantive policy debates, or where it gives excessively unbalanced and partisan coverage of the government and public policy processes.

Chapter 7 turns to the role and structure of the news media as gate-keepers in the public forum. Communication policy regulating the structure of the news industry can play a decisive role in determining coverage of governance issues in the public sphere. In particular, the balance of public and commercial broadcasting varies substantially worldwide. Does public service broadcasting continue to retain a distinctive role in providing balanced information about news and public affairs, providing a platform for all interests and viewpoints, in the traditional model established by the British Broadcasting Corporation, or has the diversity of private news channels now available made this redundant? What is the role of community radio, both state-owned and commercial, as a public forum? What is the role of new information and communication technologies in the public sphere, including the Internet and mobile telephony, in widening the diversity of voices in the public sphere? *Chapter 8* focuses on campaign coverage in a series of election campaigns to explore how far it provides a level playing field for parties and candidates from all political persuasions, interests, and social sectors? This issue is particularly important in transitional autocracies and in consolidating democracies where one major party is predominant, and where the opposition parties and reform movements have difficulty in getting their message out to rally popular support.

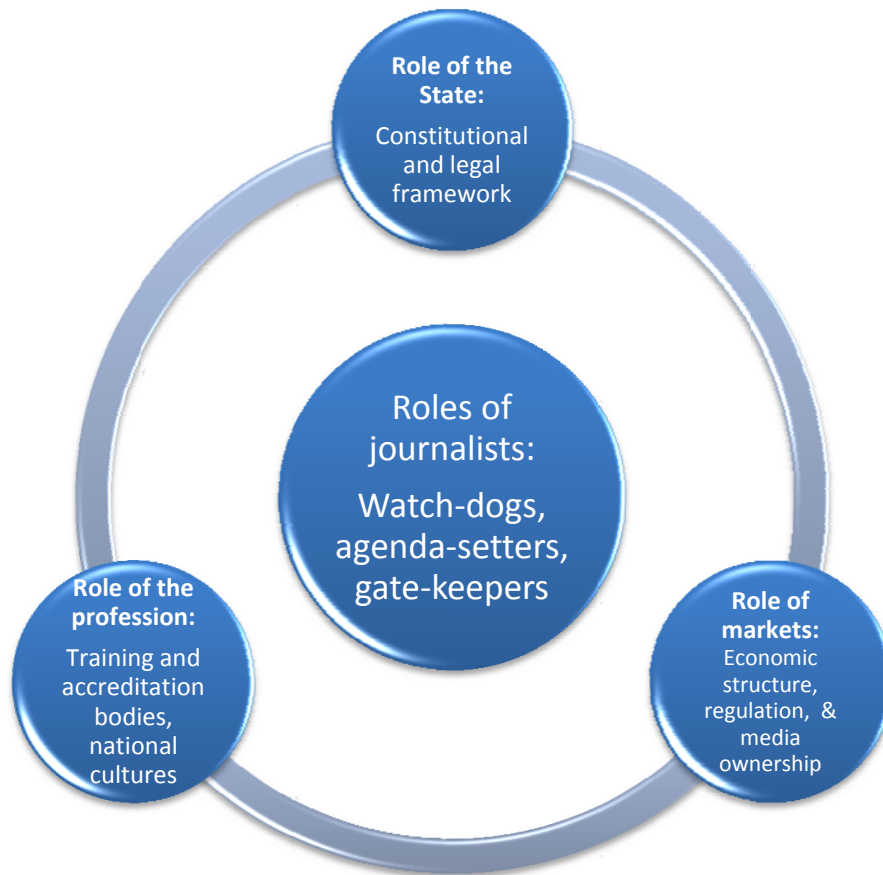
Chapter 9 examines how far autocracies can strengthen popular support by silencing dissent and manipulating the news. The many ways that autocracies seek to control the media are well documented. What is less clearly established, however, is how far states with restrictive media environments thereby succeed in manipulating public opinion and strengthening their support at home. The cumulative result of years, or even decades, of tight media control in restrictive and isolated states such as Burma and North Korea is usually assumed to have a powerful impact upon citizens. This chapter looks at new evidence from the World Values Survey for the effects of limits on press freedom for patterns of regime support in more than sixty nations. *Chapter 10* goes on to consider the role of the mass media in post-conflict reconstruction. In the early stages of any negotiated settlement, peace-building and conflict reduction, it is particularly important to have a pluralistic news media which fosters tolerance and open communication through balanced coverage of all sides involved in the conflict. But often this process fails where the news media is highly partisan, especially in societies deeply divided by language into separate communities.

The third part of the book considers in-depth case-studies illustrating how the roles of journalists as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gate-keepers in the public sphere vary across and among different world regions. *Chapters 11-13* should take up the issues raised in earlier sections of the workshop and then explore them in depth within sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Arab States, focusing upon selected comparative case studies within each region.

Lastly the conclusion in *Chapter 14* summarizes the key policy options and makes recommendations for future action. There are a number of distinct types or levels of intervention. At the institutional level, one of the most important issues concerns the *constitutional and legal guarantees of freedom of expression and publication*, especially following peace-building initiatives and the reconstruction of fragile states, as well as in the deregulation of state broadcasting following the initial transition to democracy. Establishing an appropriate *legal framework governing communication policies* also plays a vital role in the consolidation of democratic states. This includes the implementation of international treaties and agreements, as well as the establishment of effective legal structures governing broadcasting licenses, concentration of media ownership, rights to information and official

government secrecy, content regulation, and media competition. These policies regulate industry-wide standards and determine the funding for public service and private sector broadcasting. The most appropriate governance structure and the financial, editorial and management independence of public service broadcasting is particularly critical. *Institutional capacity building* is also important for sustainable solutions, including fostering professional journalism organizations, press councils, independent media networks, and professional awards to strengthen standards and journalistic cultures. Lastly, at the most individual level, *professional journalism training programs* and individual capacity building efforts are often employed. While important, it remains the case that individual journalists are often limited from playing their roles as effective agenda-setters, watch-dogs and gatekeepers by multiple structural restrictions and institutional disincentives. Therefore the report concludes by reviewing which provisions and interventions reflect best practice in each of these areas, which institutions and agencies have been most engaged, and what can be learnt from interventions about the most effective way to promote the roles of the press as watch-dogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers.

Figure 2: Factors influencing the roles of journalists



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- ³ Larry Diamond. 2008. *The Spirit of Democracy: The Struggle to Build Free Societies Throughout the World*. New York: Times Books.
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- ⁵ Bettina Peters. 2003. 'The media's role: Covering or covering up corruption?' In *The Global Corruption Report*. Transparency international. http://www.transparency.org/publications/gcr/download_gcr/download_gcr_2003; Silvio Waisbord, 2000. *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy*. NY: Columbia University Press; S.K, Chowdhury. 2004. 'The effect of democracy and press freedom on corruption: an empirical test.' *Economics Letters* 85 (1): 93-101; D. Fell. 2005. 'Political and media liberalization and political corruption in Taiwan.' *China Quarterly* (184): 875-893.
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¹⁶ Thomas Hanitzsch. 2007. 'Deconstructing Journalism Culture: Towards a universal theory.' *Communication Theory* 17(4): 367-385. See also, the World of Journalist project, www.worldofjournalisms.org.

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surrogate for the public, asking probing, penetrating questions at every level, from the town council to the state house to the White House, as well as in corporate and professional offices, in union halls, on university campuses and in religious organizations that seek to influence governmental actions. The goal of watchdog journalism is to see that people in power provide information the public should have.”

http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=about.Mission_Statement

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