Chapter 1
Evaluating media performance
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Today the world faces multiple challenges in democratic governance and human development. The spread of democracy has been extraordinary; since the early-1970s, following the ‘third wave’, more states worldwide have held multiparty elections than ever before. Today, roughly two-thirds of all independent nation-states (121 out of 193) are electoral democracies. Despite this, during the last decade, many indicators suggest that the further advance of democratic governance has stagnated or even reversed. Observers have detected signs of a democratic recession. Major setbacks have been experienced in countries as diverse as Russia, Venezuela, Pakistan, Georgia, Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Thailand. Contemporary challenges facing all democracies, old and new, include expanding opportunities for more inclusive voices in civil society. Reforms urgently need to improve the responsiveness, transparency, effectiveness, and accountability of governance institutions, so that democracy works for the poor as well as the rich. Moreover, respect for international standards of universal human rights need to be further strengthened in all parts of the world.

Democratic governance is intrinsically important for maximizing fundamental freedoms, human choice, and self-determination, and it is also critical for its instrumental consequences for development. The world’s leaders came together at the United Nations in 2000 and pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG’s). Achieving the goals would involve save millions of lives, empowering women, eradicating the scourge of illiteracy, hunger and malnutrition, and guaranteeing that children have access to education and good health. The series of specific targets highlight the urgent need for halving extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, improving child mortality and maternal health, and promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment. Many countries have made remarkable progress in lifting millions out of extreme poverty, fuelled in particular by economic growth in the emerging BRIC economies (Brazil, Russia, India, and China). The UN mid-term assessment of progress towards the MDGs highlights that countries where the development goals are being met most successfully are those where good governance is one of the central factors, combined with resource mobilization and donor support, technical know-how, south-south cooperation, effective national and local planning, and investment in institutional and individual capacity development.

Despite advances in the BRICs, the UN reports that most low-income countries will fail to achieve their national targets. Today, past 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. Groups most at risk include the most vulnerable populations living in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, confronting multiple developmental obstacles, and fragile states emerging from recent conflict.

New problems which have arisen since the 2000 Summit also threaten to derail further progress. Additional hurdles in meeting these goals include the deep recession in the global economy, the looming challenge of climate change, and the persistence of deep-rooted conflict and terrorism. In particular, unless urgent steps are taken, the deepening worldwide financial crisis, which started in summer 2007, will substantially shrink the pool of resources available both for investment and for aid. By fall 2008, the worsening financial environment has triggered falling world trade, plunging equity markets, a steep loss of confidence in financial institutions, growing uncertainty, and deeper aversion to risk. It is estimated that rapid growth will slow in BRIC emerging economies, while the world’s poorest societies will suffer from reduced demands for their exports, loss of investment capital, and lower commodity prices. Global growth in GDP is projected to expand by only 0.9% in 2009, the lowest level since records began in 1970s. The urgency of the domestic economic problems afflicting rich societies at home threatens to draw attention away from concern about development challenges abroad. Nevertheless, effective solutions to alleviate the economic crisis reinforce the critical importance of building state capacity in financial regulation and management of the economy.

Within the broad context of the major issues facing the international development community, this report focuses upon the performance of the news media as an institution in addressing these challenges. In particular, the report seeks to consider three related issues.

Firstly, normatively, what ideal roles should media systems play to strengthen democratic governance and thus bolster human development? Journalists and reporters can and do play multiple roles in different contexts, often serving as spokespersons of the state or commercial media owners, rather than reporting about urgent humanitarian crisis and development challenges facing the marginalized and poor, or challenging the rich and powerful. To strengthen the democratic public sphere, we emphasize the institutional or collective roles of the news media as watchdogs over the powerful, as agenda-setters calling attention to natural and manmade disasters and humanitarian crisis, and as gatekeepers incorporating a diverse and balanced range of political perspectives and social sectors. Each, we argue, is vital to the quality of democratic deliberation in the public sphere.

Secondly, empirically, according to independent evidence derived from cross-national comparisons and from selected case studies, under what conditions do media systems actually succeed
or fail to fulfill these objectives? The report theorizes that the capacity of media systems (and thus individual journalists embedded within these institutions) to fulfill these roles depends upon the broader context determined by the profession, the market, and ultimately the state. Successive chapters document the impact of these constraints upon journalists in different places, types of regimes, and global regions. The performance of a range of media systems are examined and compared in places as diverse as Kenya and Mexico, Iraq and Ethiopia, Burma and North Korea, Egypt and Qatar. Faced with the constraints of the profession, markets and the state, the evidence suggests that in reality the performance of media systems often fall far short of these ideals, with important consequences for the workings of the public sphere.

Lastly, strategically, what policy interventions work most effectively to close the substantial gap which exists between the democratic promise and performance of the news media as an institution? We identify a menu of alternative actions. Interventions can be directed strategically at strengthening the journalistic profession, notably institutional capacity building, such as press councils, media freedom advocacy NGOs, and organizations concerned with journalistic training and accreditation. Other reform initiatives address market failures, including developing a regulatory legal framework for media systems to ensure pluralism of ownership and diversity of contents. Lastly, policies also address the role of the state, including deregulation shifting state-run to public service broadcasting, overseen by independent broadcasting regulatory bodies, and the protection of constitutional principles of freedom of the press, speech, and expression. The most effective strategies are holistic approaches addressing all three levels but specific initiatives need to be tailored to the specific challenges facing each country. Comprehensive media system audits and specific performance indicators should be integrated into all development projects. To consider all these issues, this chapter outlines the normative framework and the core concepts guiding the report, and then sets out the roadmap for the volume.

The idea of a democratic public sphere

A long tradition of liberal theorists, from Milton through Locke and Madison to John Stuart Mill, have argued that a free and independent press within each nation can play a vital role in the process of democratization by contributing towards the right of freedom of expression, thought, and conscience. 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 influence collective
decisions, 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 Lippmann, Hannah Arendt and John Dewey, although it is probably most widely known today from the works of the theorist, Jurgen Habermas.\(^\text{10}\)

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 (\textit{Öffentlichkeit}) facilitated reasoned deliberation, critical discussion, and tolerance of alternative arguments and viewpoints. In eighteenth century Europe, Habermas envisaged the public sphere as a space for critical discussion, open to all, where people came together to exchange views and share knowledge. The process of deliberation in the public sphere encouraged the development of a rational and informed consensus in public opinion, he argued, which functioned as a check on state power. The expansion of the public sphere in 18th century Europe was facilitated, he theorized, by the development of new spaces for social and intellectual interaction --exemplified by the expansion of newspapers, journals, reading clubs, salons, and coffeehouses in metropolitan society. Nevertheless, Habermas was more pessimistic about contemporary society, as he believed that the public sphere eroded during the 19\(^{th}\) and early-20\(^{th}\) centuries. He feared that the growth of the broadcast electronic media turned the critical and active public into more passive mass audiences, while he believed that the growth of organized interest groups and political parties came to dominate parliamentary debate about public affairs.

Habermas’s concept of the public sphere has been widely influential, although his vision has attracted considerable debate and criticism.\(^\text{11}\) The theory may well have romanticized the notion of widespread public engagement in 18\(^{th}\) Century Europe, where the moneyed elites, professional classes and landed echelons predominated in the literary clubs, scientific societies, and journals found in Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna. Moreover, while exaggerating how far these forums were open to all the European public, Habermas may also have simultaneously under-estimated the extension of the public sphere to wider social sectors in subsequent eras. In European societies, this growth was linked during the 19\(^{th}\) century with the flowering of working men’s associations, mass-branch political parties, voluntary and philanthropic groups, agricultural and economic cooperatives, professional organizations, literary and scientific societies, and trade unions. All these provided meeting places for public
participation and discussion for the working class, while the gradual spread of literacy, and universal primary and secondary education, expanded the capacity of the European public for deliberative democracy.

Irrespective of the historical evidence underlying Habermas’ account of communicative action, many of these ideas remain important. In particular, his recognition of the need for common spaces in civic society to facilitate public deliberation and critical debate about major issues of common concern, and the idea that such a process strengthens the development of an informed public opinion as an independent check on the power of the state, continue to resonate widely today.12 As theories of social capital emphasize, informal networks, community groups, and voluntary associations are a vital part of inter-personal face-to-face communications. But the media, old and new, is the core institution facilitating mass communications in the public sphere in contemporary societies. Habermas distinguished between the early era of newspapers and pamphlets, which he regarded as a vital part of the public sphere, and the subsequent development of mass circulation dailies and broadcast electronic media, which he denigrated. The reason for this categorization were not clearly established theoretically, however, and this watertight distinction has become increasingly fuzzy following the growth of more decentralized electronic channels, exemplified by the role of community radio, talk radio, and local television. Indeed since Habermas first developed his theory during the early-1960s, the growth of opportunities for social interaction and exchange through modern information and communication technologies has transformed the capacity of the electronic media to strengthen horizontal linkages as well as vertical ones. Digital communication networks -- exemplified by the blogosphere, list-serves, mobilizing political networks like Move-On.com, uploaded news videos on YouTube, and feedback interactive comments and photos from readers published on news websites -- provide the modern equivalent of 18th century pamphlets, newspaper letter pages, journals, and periodicals.

Building loosely upon these notions, we can theorize that a modern public sphere which strengthens contemporary forms of democratic governance requires at least three minimal conditions: a constitutional and legal framework protecting civil liberties; widespread public access to multiple pluralistic sources of information and communication; and equal opportunities for inclusive participation and voice within civil society. Each can be regarded as necessary although not sufficient pre-conditions for a flourishing public sphere and thus for the development of rational and informed public opinion. Derived from these notions, Figure 1.1 depicts the organizing conceptual framework for the report.
Firstly, securing the democratic integrity of the public sphere requires a constitutional and legal framework guaranteeing basic civil liberties, including respect for the rights to free expression, argument, association, debate and discussion, and rights of access to information. In this regards, the notion reflects the traditional concepts embodied in 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.” More recently, this principle was reaffirmed in the United Nations Millennium Declaration (General Assembly resolution 55/2), which was unanimously adopted in September 2000 by all 189 Member States of the United Nations. Amongst other pledges, it reasserted the commitment of Member States: “To ensure the freedom of the media to perform their essential role and the right of the public to have access to information.” The intrinsic value of freedom of expression as a universal human right is widely recognized elsewhere, including in the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights. These claims are embodied in many other national constitutions around the world, as well as in the growing body of Freedom of Information laws and statutes. In the United States, for example, the First Amendment of the United States Constitution prohibits Congress from passing laws that abridge freedom of the press. Freedom of expression requires an independent mass media as one of the primary channels of communication in any society, linking citizens-to-citizens, as well as citizens and the state. Where critical discussion is muzzled or independent voices silenced through the techniques of coercion, censorship or intimidation, then this process limits fundamental freedoms.

But formal rights are not sufficient, by themselves, to guarantee that deliberative democracy works for all. Within this context, the democratic public sphere also depends upon the quality of informed discourse and thus widespread access to information derived from multiple sources of interpersonal and mediated communications. Information arises from direct interpersonal conversations among family, friends, and colleagues in their daily interactions within the local community, the workplace, and the neighborhood. With the growing diffusion of communication technologies, information today is also exchanged through person-to-person electronic networks, for example via mobile cellular and fixed line telephony, emails, and text messaging. Much information, especially about our own and other societies, also continues to flow from one-to-many through the mass media. This is transmitted via diverse channels: terrestrial, cable and satellite broadcast 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. In this report, our focus upon the media systems therefore includes traditional news outlets, such as newspapers and magazines, radio and television news, books and pamphlets, but also the growing role of information and communication technologies. These are all the essential conduits for timely and accurate communications about public events and issues in modern societies. Citizens lacking widespread access to information and communication --a situation most common among social sectors such as the poor and illiterate, women and minorities -- are thereby excluded from full and equal participation in the public sphere.

Lastly, the existence of information without opportunities for the communication and expression of social needs, priorities, and concerns, is also not sufficient for a robust deliberative democracy. An effective public sphere also depends upon opportunities for participation and interaction within civil society. Diverse arenas and social spaces should be open to all citizens and viewpoints in any society, without excluding any sector, group or persuasion. The notion emphasizes the role of public engagement in a variety of deliberative forums. Traditionally this process has operated through town hall and village meetings, community gatherings, local party branch assemblies, election hustings, neighborhood clubs, workshops and seminars, religious assemblies, trade union, NGO and cooperative associations - with the growth of mass literacy and access to mass communications expanding opportunities for informed discourse. The process also involves modern forms of civic engagement which are evolving in contemporary societies, exemplified by participatory budgets in Brazil, social audits in India, protest politics and demonstrations in France, online networks in the United States, direct action environmental campaigns in Britain, and transnational social movements connecting local and global actors.

Based on this normative vision, the following characteristics of a democratic public sphere emerge (visually depicted in Figure 1.1):

- A constitutional and legal framework protects and guarantees civil liberties and political rights, especially the fundamental freedoms of expression, opinion, information, and assembly, as well as rights of access to information. The media are independent from state control, official censorship, and legal restrictions.
• *All people enjoy widespread access to pluralistic sources of information in the public sphere,* enabling equal opportunities for expression and participation, especially providing access to information for marginalized sectors within society including women, young people, minorities, the poor and illiterate.

• *A rich, robust and inclusive civil society flourishes* with multiple organizations and diverse associations facilitating unrestricted deliberation, cooperation, and collaboration on issues of common concern. Civil society is strengthened where diverse perspectives, social sectors, interests, parties, and political persuasions are reflected in the mass media.

Where these components function effectively, the democratic public sphere helps to promote governance which is accountable to citizens and responsive to human needs. Through this process, an independent media can strengthen the responsiveness of governments to all citizens, and provide a pluralist platform of political expression bringing together a multiplicity of parties, groups, sectors, and interests.

The theoretical vision provided by Habermas is thus larger and richer than the simple notion of electoral democracy. The public sphere is regarded as valuable for promoting informed citizens and for deliberative and reasoned decision-making. But an effective public sphere also has consequences for electoral democracy, as citizens with more timely and accurate information are empowered to make better choices. Informed citizens can match their policy preferences more accurately against the political choices available in an election. Without transparency about the performance of the government and the policies offered by parties and candidates contending for elected office, the act of casting a vote becomes meaningless and governments cannot be held to account. The independent news media has often been regarded as particularly important for promoting government transparency and accountability, especially where investigative journalism highlights cases of corruption and misconduct. Elected leaders also require accurate information about public concerns and social needs to be responsive to development challenges. Freedom of the media is one of the key tenets of democracy that ensures government transparency and accountability.

Sen argues that the independent news media is also critical for attaining the broader goals of human development. Studies suggest that information can improve the delivery of public services, forewarn against natural disasters, spread education and knowledge, and reduce preventable health risks. International news helps inform the international community about severe challenges facing low-
income states and urgent humanitarian crisis arising from natural and manmade disasters.\textsuperscript{19} The 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.\textsuperscript{20} Reporting conveys diplomatic signals between nations and shapes domestic perceptions about foreign countries.\textsuperscript{21} Communication is widely regarded as the life-blood of economic markets; it facilitates trade, transmits ideas, and diffuses innovations, thus promotes growth. Countries with both widespread media access and an independent free press have been found to experience several beneficial consequences, including 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.\textsuperscript{22}

It is reasonable to acknowledge that, measured against Habermas’s normative theory, no single country or place serves as a perfect example of the democratic public sphere. But this holds true for all the other outcomes in the democratic governance agenda, such as responsive and accountable public service providers and meritocratic civil service systems. The key questions tackled in this report are under what conditions do the media function in a way which most closely matches the ideals of the public sphere? Where and why do the media fail? And, where there are constraints, what policy interventions strengthen the capacity of journalists to work most effectively in this regard?

**The ideal functions of media systems**

Within these broad notions, this report focuses upon the challenges facing the development of effective communications systems in the public sphere and, in particular, the contribution of media systems 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. Over the years, many rival normative standards have been developed for evaluating the performance of media systems.\textsuperscript{23} Here we focus upon understanding how effectively media systems function in their roles as ‘watchdogs’, ‘gatekeepers’, and ‘agenda-setters’.

To clarify the core concepts, ‘roles’ are understood as a set of expectations governing the behavior of persons and institutions holding a particular function in society. As a set of norms, values and standards that defines how persons and institutions should and do work, roles 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 collective and individual levels. This report focuses most attention at collective levels, where roles determine the institutional practices, cultural values, behavioral norms, and the standard routines characteristic of the media system within any society. We can also look at collective roles within any media sector, in this regard we can compare, for example, the role of community radio with that of the local press, or in the global news arena, the role of BBC World 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, representing the notion of external diversity. This is arguably more vital to informed public debate than the need for impartial balance, or internal diversity, established within each media outlet, by each individual reporter, or in any 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. Typical strategies include strengthening rights to freedom of information, expression and publication in law, deregulating state ownership of broadcasting to facilitate a plurality of independent channels, investing in the infrastructure supporting diverse community radio stations, newspapers, and websites, and reforming professional journalistic training and accreditation bodies.

At individual-level, roles determine the norms and values, standards of behavior, and orientations shaping the job of individual news workers. This includes a diverse range of occupations in the communication sector, 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. 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.

The extensive research literature seeking to understand the collective roles of the news media has usually focused upon identifying and describing the perceived and actual roles of individual journalists. Although the appropriate universe and the sampling frame remains difficult to identify, studies have typically gathered data derived from surveys of representative samples of individual journalists. Surveys have monitored professional routines, editorial procedures, and socialization processes, as well as expectations surrounding their work. This data is often then aggregated upwards to study particular sectors, for example to contrast the roles of print versus broadcast reporters, or to compare national journalistic cultures. Such surveys have now been conducted in a wide range of countries and this approach is currently being expanded worldwide. Journalists have been examined through this method in many post-industrial societies and established democracies, including Germany, the United States, Britain and Italy. This approach has also been extended to low and middle-income countries as diverse as Brazil, Indonesia, Russia, China, Egypt, Bangladesh, Nepal and Tanzania. Chapter 13 compares the results of such a survey conducted in the Arab region.

The results of this body of research 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 important cross-cultural variations exist in role perceptions. 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. Journalists also differ in how far they see 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 roles which journalists actually perceive have been classified and described through the growing range of empirical studies. However, this classification has been only weakly related to, or embodied within, broader normative or prescriptive theories about the public sphere, 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 well see their primary responsibilities as ‘lap-dogs’, acting as loyal spokespersons for state 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 reflecting the interests of the state may also fail to reflect the voice and concerns of opposition movements, reform dissidents, and politically marginalized sectors, typically including women, rural and ethnic minorities, and the poor. Commercial pressures mean that journalists often focus on providing ‘soft’ news about celebrities, entertainment and sports, 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 watchdogs, 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.
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 turn public attention to matter of common interest, 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 -- for example, in practice journalists may perceive their roles as educating the public, as spokespersons for authorities, as active advocates for reform, or as strengthening collective national identities. Indeed journalists may reject the notions we offer, if they are regarded as unrealistic or impractical in many situations. Role definitions often prove to be slippery and ambiguous concepts. Nevertheless, the triple roles that we emphasize 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, and the media commonly fails even in established democracies. Yet 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.32 In practice, many barriers 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 constraints by the state, the market and the profession.

Watchdogs

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.33 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.  

The defining feature of watchdog 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 informed choice by citizens 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. At the same time, it is also challenged by those who believe that too much expose journalism undermines faith and trust in government institutions, promoting instability and undermining fragile states.

**Agenda-setters**

Although conceptually distinct, watchdog journalism is related to agenda setting. It functions where journalists investigate previously obscure problems, and thereby highlight these issues in the news headlines. As an ‘agenda-setter’, it is claimed that the news media should function to raise awareness of social problems, especially calling attention to 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 idea has subsequently been applied to multiple issues and countries with an extensive body of literature developing over more than three decades. 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

Gatekeepers

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. 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 gatekeepers 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.

Under what conditions does the news media achieve these ideals?

Although not without challenge, these normative 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, and professional cultures can all severely limit the effectiveness of the watchdog, agenda-setting and gate-keeping roles of the news media. Figure 1.2 illustrates these constraints, understood as an embedded model.

[Figure 1.2 about here]
The role of the state may be particularly important in setting the broadest context. Constitutional and legal restrictions can severely 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 been employed to shut down newspapers and to silence critical voices. 43 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. Important factors include 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 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. Journalists may reject the legitimacy of the roles of the press as watchdogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers, 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 is 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. Media audits provide a more comprehensive tool to assess the current state of media systems and to identify major challenges in each society. 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**

Subsequent chapters examine how the news media functions as an institution against these ideal 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 growing body of indicators and metrics available to measure how well the news media performs.45 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 watchdogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers 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 evidence of trends over time? And can the indices be transformed into typologies and classifications for comparing these roles?

On this basis, the second section of the report examines evidence from cross-national studies and selected case studies to understand the performance of journalists and the constraints under which they operate in practice. We start with agenda setting, particularly how far the news media raises awareness of social needs and development challenges – or how far they fail to lead with these stories. 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. Chapter 3 focuses upon
understanding how far the news media succeed, and fail, in their agenda-setting role when covering natural crisis and disasters such as famines, floods and pandemics. 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 and crisis in developing countries overseas, and how far this process encourages the responsiveness of donor governments in sponsoring humanitarian aid and technical assistance.

Chapter 5 goes on to consider the ‘watchdog’ role of investigative journalism which holds powerful public officials and institutions responsible for their decision and actions. Watchdog journalism is expected to prove particularly important for good governance when highlighting problems of corruption, malfeasance, cronyism, and scandal in the public sector, thereby raising standards 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 discusses notions of accountability and considers evidence to see whether in practice the watchdog role of the news media contributes towards more informed and engaged citizens— or to a public that is turned off by politics and more cynical about democratic institutions and processes.

Chapter 7 turns to the role and structure of the news media as gatekeepers in the public forum. The chapter focuses upon campaign coverage in a series of elections in four case studies – in Mexico, Turkey, Russia and Kenya. The study explores how far the campaign coverage provided a neutral and balanced level playing field for parties and candidates from all political persuasions, interests, and social sectors. The issue of partisan balance and bias 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 8 builds on this to examine how far autocracies have the capacity to 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 evidence from the World Values Survey concerning the effects of limits on press freedom for patterns of regime support in more than sixty nations. Chapter 9 goes on to consider the role of the mass media in post-conflict reconstruction, drawing upon the cases of Iraq and Ethiopia. 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 one-sided in its coverage, especially in societies deeply divided by language or religion into separate communities. The chapter emphasizes that the roles of the media are particularly challenging in the early stages of recovery from conflict, and in building a unified nation-state, prior to the development of democracy.

The third section of the book considers how the roles of journalists as watchdogs, agenda-setters and gatekeepers in the public sphere vary across and among different world regions. Chapters 10-14 build upon the issues raised in earlier sections of the report and then explore them in depth using a wide range of selected case studies within Central and Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Arab States, and Asia. The comparative case studies highlight the complexity of the issues and the important challenges which exist within each region. The issues facing the newer democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, emphasize the transition from state-run and owned broadcasting to a dual public service and commercial television system. In Sub-Saharan Africa, although there are some similar challenges, there are also distinct problems in freedom of expression. By contrast, the press in Latin America has been largely organized around commercial principles for many years and the key problems arise from the excessive power of governments and private interests. Freedom of expression has been most heavily curtailed in the Arab region, although there are important stirrings of media reform in recent years. And Asia remains highly diverse, with traditional views about the roles of journalists which are often at odds with the ideals considered in this report. These chapters also emphasize the constraints on journalists fulfilling the ideal functions, especially in states governed by autocratic regimes and in consolidating democracies which continue to have weak institutions and poor quality governance.

Lastly, the conclusion in Chapter 15 summarizes the key findings and identifies the major policy options which are most effective for future action. The chapter emphasizes prioritizing an institutional perspective, incorporating media system audits into governance diagnostics and needs analysis. The menu of interventions, providing alternatives which can be tailored to each context, includes those
reforms addressing the role of the state, market failures, and the journalistic profession. ensuring that media systems are plural and diverse, turning state broadcasters into public service broadcasters, removing all curbs on the print media, supporting sustainable professional development programs, encouraging links between the news media and civil society organizations, and supporting media literacy.

At the level of the state, 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, rights to information and official government secrecy, as well as in the deregulation of state broadcasting following the initial transition to democracy.

To address market failures, interventions include establishing an appropriate legal framework and regulatory environment governing communication policies. This includes the implementation of international treaties and agreements, as well as the establishment of effective legal structures and independent bodies regulating broadcasting licenses, concentration of media ownership, 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.

Lastly, in terms of the profession, institutional capacity building is important for sustainable solutions. This includes fostering professional journalism organizations, press councils, independent media advocacy networks and associations, and professional awards designed to strengthen standards and journalistic cultures. Professional journalism training programs and individual capacity building efforts are also commonly employed. While remaining important, it needs to be recognized that training programs often have limited effect where individual journalists are limited from playing their roles as effective agenda-setters, watchdogs 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 in the public sphere.
Figure 1.1: Model of the democratic public sphere

The democratic public sphere

- Constitional and legal framework protecting civil liberties
  - Freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and conscience, and rights of access to information

- Pluralistic communication systems facilitating widespread access and the free flow of information
  - Interpersonal communications
  - Mass media systems

- Rich and robust civil society
  - Inclusive and equal opportunities for participation and voice

- Watchdog role
- Agenda-setting role
- Gatekeeping role
Figure 1.2: Conditions influencing the performance of media systems

Role of the State:
Constitutional and legal framework

Role of markets:
Economic structure, regulation, & media ownership

Role of the profession:
Training and accreditation bodies

Roles of media systems:
Watch-dogs, agenda-setters, gate-keepers


10 One of the most influential reflections on the concept of the public sphere has been provided by Jurgen Habermas. 1989 (1962). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Cambridge: Polity Press.


http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/millennium.htm


34 The Nieman Watchdog Journalism Project, part of the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University, specified the role as follows in their mission statement: “The premise of watchdog journalism is that the press is a 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


