From the Field:
In Search of Evidence –
Media and Governance in Fragile States

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Abstract: This article reflects on efforts to identify evidence about the role of media in fragile states. It explores and compares findings from two research projects and focuses on some of the lessons that have emerged from these exercises as well as on the relevance of the findings for media development. While we know that media matters in areas such as conflict, reconciliation and peacebuilding, neither of the reviews of the literature found substantial evidence supporting some of the widespread claims about the importance of media, suggesting how elusive this evidence can be.

Keywords: media; ICTs; internet; conflict; peacebuilding; international development; fragile states; governance

International development donors have become increasingly preoccupied with how 'evidence' can ground policymaking. This renewed emphasis on evidence, particularly on the part of the UK government, has sought to stress that development aid will not be ideologically driven but more 'rational' and rigorous, or, as some have gone so far to argue, "scientific" (Sutcliffe & Court, 2006). Evidence generally refers to the strength and quality of the existing research, as well as reviews of evaluations and assessments about the impact of particular interventions or aid on governance (DFID, 2011: p. 2).

In many respects the media assistance sector, especially in terms of its role in governance in fragile states, has lagged behind in the evidence debate. Media are often seen as 'too soft' for much development aid, peripheral to more pressing areas such as health or infrastructure, and a relatively inexpensive sector not requiring significant investment on the part of donors. But the desire, and the need, to better understand the role of both older and newer media, from newspapers to mobile phones, is increasingly coming to the fore as media are becoming more integrated with governance processes, from mobile banking to

providing government data online, and are an important tool in political mobilization.

We know media matter, but we are less clear on how they matter in governance. The 'evidence' seems to be elusive. While there is a comparatively more robust literature on health communications in developing countries, as well as on educational programming, the evidence on media and governance in fragile states is weaker (Abraham-Dowsing, Godfrey, & Khor, 2014). I have recently been involved in two projects that have been tasked with identifying 'evidence' and 'knowledge' focusing on the role of media in conflict and post-conflict situations, primarily in Africa. This short article will focus on some of the lessons that have emerged from these exercises as well as on the relevance of the findings for media development. Neither reviews of the literature found substantial evidence supporting some of the widespread claims about the importance of media in governance processes including areas such as reconciliation and peace building in conflict and post-conflict environments. This is not to say that such evidence does not exist but it does indicate how elusive this evidence can be.

The Scope of the Search

The two studies had different starting points, and slightly different areas of focus, but they shared the overarching goal of assessing the state of research and evidence and identifying key pieces of literature that were empirically grounded. They also defined 'media' slightly differently, one emphasizing new technologies while the other included older forms of media as well, a factor that was dependent on the timeframe included in the sample.

The first study, for which a shortened version has been published in *Progress in Development Studies* (Schoemaker and Stremlau, 2014), was part of the DFID funded Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP) at the London School of Economics.[1] The JSRP focuses on understanding justice and security in the context of "the everyday politics and realities" of poor countries with the goal that better understanding of the context will help to develop more informed policies. As a starting point, DFID urged that each of the potential research streams should undertake a systematic review of the evidence to identify the major gaps in the literature (DFID, 2014). What exactly constituted evidence, and the ways in which evidence is often interpreted according to political or ideological agendas was, not surprisingly, highly contested in the research group. The evidence base was to be as free from bias as possible and also establish a baseline that could be repeated in the future to determine changes in the field.

Using a methodology to identify evidence that was defined by the research consortium as a whole, with input from DFID, and applied to areas such as "resources, conflict and governance", "climate change and conflict" and

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[1] For further information about the JSRP, see http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/jsrp/.

"transitional justice" (Cuvelier, Vlassenroot & Olin, 2013; Forsyth & Schomerus, 2013), Emrys Schoemaker and I, with the help of an able group of LSE graduate students, set about applying it to "media and conflict". Given the emerging nature of new media, neither of us expected to find an abundance of evidence about the role of new media in the academic literature. There has simply not been enough time for such publications. But our time period also stretched back to include conflicts during which the mass media clearly did have some role, such as Rwanda in 1994, so we did anticipate finding some studies, for example, that would explicitly address the connection between radio or the press and violence or peace building. What did surprise us, however, was how few studies our review did turn up that had a solid evidence base rather than studies that made assumptions about such causal relationships. After the research papers were filtered (22 thousand were initially identified) and graded, only 32 remained, plus a handful more that were referenced through a peer review process. What this review included is as important as what was excluded – there was a clear focus on key words such as 'media' and 'conflict', leaving aside a larger field of study with a longer history of media intervention such as media and health, and our study was also focused on selected key countries where media and technology were either strongly associated with recent political events and transitions or there were significant claims for the role of both older media and newer media in recent conflicts such as Rwanda, Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt.

While this was by no means a comprehensive review, as it did not, for example, cover all countries or communities affected by violent conflict around the world, it does give insight into the larger state of research in this field. The strength of this study was the systematic approach to collecting, analyzing and assessing the evidence within the constraints of the sample, an approach that has also allowed some degree of comparability with the other research sectors of the JSRP programme. But the method of grading the evidence, and the emphasis on articles that have the highest proportion of empirical data with a robust description of methodologies, tended to disadvantage more qualitative work. With the limited word count many journals offer, ethnographic studies, for example, are often very brief about how the evidence is gathered while quantitative studies tend to emphasize methodology and the potential for replication.

If the focus of the JSRP research was to systematically seek out evidence from a broad body of literature, the second project had a more narrow scope and helped to address some of the limitations inherent in the first study. This research paper, forthcoming in the International Journal of Communication, was part of the Carnegie Corporation of New York's initiative on Eliciting and Applying Local Research Knowledge for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding in Africa, which seeks to "increase the level of recognition and utilization of local peacebuilding and statebuilding expertise and capacity in post-conflict contexts".[2] This second study

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[2] For an overview of this initiative, see: http://carnegie.org/news/press-releases/story/news-action/single/view/eliciting-and-applying-local-research-knowledge-for-peacebuilding-and-

involved significant efforts at tracking down "local" research and reaching beyond the large databases that the JSRP research project focused on. Again, specific countries had to be targeted and our focus was on Eastern Africa, which also provided the comparative cases for the subsequent phases of the research project.[3]

In an effort to diagnose this elusive concept of 'local knowledge' about new media (and here our focus for this review was just on 'new media') in peace building and state building, we worked closely with graduate students at our partner university, the University of Pennsylvania, to run focused searches on international databases such as EBSCO, First Search/OCLC, and JStor. As expected, this search primarily turned up the literature in international academic journals. One of the major tenets of the idea behind the movement towards identifying and recognizing 'local knowledge' is that research by Africans is often excluded from such publications, and academics and students often lack access to expensive databases and journals. In an effort to delve into the grey literature from public bodies and non-governmental organizations, as well as PhD and Masters theses from African Universities, a second search was carried out by the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), in Uganda, with the aim of capturing research emerging specifically from Africa.[4] Similar to the JSRP study, research that did not feature empirical evidence was excluded.[5]

Limited Evidence

While the role of 'evidence' in policy making, and the definition of evidence itself, has been highly contested, both studies found a lack of evidence, broadly defined[6]. Notably, our JSRP study turned up the least number of research papers to be considered (32) in comparison with the other research streams with the emerging field of 'climate change and conflict' a close second with forty articles. The search by the 'resources, conflict and governance' team, for example, revealed 192 papers and 'transitional justice' identified 273.

Not surprisingly, some of the most timely and abundant studies were reports

statebuilding-africa/.

[3] The literature review was the first step. In collaboration with Addis Ababa University (Ethiopia), Strathmore University (Nairobi, Kenya) and the Heritage Institute for Policy Studies (Mogadishu, Somalia) several research streams were developed focusing on media and governance in conflict-affected communities. The comparative case study offers unique insights as Kenya is widely seen as an 'innovation hub' with heavy private sector involvement, ICT development in Ethiopia has been largely government led, and in Somalia there is a thriving ICT sector despite the long term conflict.

[4] CIPESA was established by Bridges.org (South Africa) in partnership with Makerere University (Uganda) and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University (USA).

[5] For both searches, studies that did not feature empirical evidence were excluded. Together, these two searches resulted in 85 empirically based articles. Of these, 34 articles featured an African lead author, 41 featured a non-African lead author (usually American or European), eight listed no author but were produced by institutions based in the U.S. or in Europe, and two were produced by one institution based in Africa.

[6] As previously mentioned, our focus was on empirical data but we considered a variety of forms, both qualitative and quantitative.

commissioned by particular media projects (often in the form of monitoring and evaluations). Given the incipient state of the field, and the challenges of researching and publishing on the impact of cutting edge technologies, much of the research that is available is published in the grey literature by NGOs and other civil society stakeholders. Sometimes theoretical but more often not, these reports typically assert the transformative role media have in conflict or post-conflict situations while citing a few case studies. This approach reflects the nature of the exercise and is a common predicament for the monitoring and evaluation field where all those involved, including the donors, the implementers and the reviewers, have a stake in a positive assessment. Studies charting failures or challenges, which, one would expect would be common in this field given the emerging and experimental nature of new technologies, rarely appeared in the literature that made it through the filters and was analyzed.

The majority of the academic literature was also couched in optimistic terms, where authors often set out to describe how media matters and how media occupy a central role in a political transition or transformation. While there are prominent cases of researchers focusing on the role of media in violence and conflict (particularly in cases such as the Balkans and Rwanda), there is a clear trend to study the potential of media and interventions in reconciliation, peacebuilding and governance. This is also reflected by the techno-deterministic approach of much of the literature when discussing new media. This can be referred to as "if-you-build-it-they-will-come", as described by the World Bank's report on broadband in Kenya (Msimang, 2011). This approach assumes that access to new media will encourage democratic behavior and good governance by creating new opportunities to affect the functioning of the state and peace efforts. However, like much of the literature, this neglects a systematic and in-depth analysis of how particular political and cultural contexts affect the role of media, and fails to consider how media sits within existing power structures and dynamics and working within pre-existing networks.

A major gap that emerged in both literature reviews was the absence of scholarship about how users actually engaged with media. There was a primary focus on the policies and projects rather than on how people and communities either make use of, or do not make use of, these communications tools. The literature tended to describe media as a segregated space that seemed to function according to its own norms and regulations (primarily western ones) rather than as part of more complex systems. A bottom-up approach exploring the informal was marginalized in favour of more top-down approaches and formal policies and projects.

Finally, while both reviews emphasized contemporary case studies (or in the case of the DFID review, events after 1990), much of the literature was a-historical. While new media, in particular, are certainly part of an emerging and cutting-edge field, there is a history of scholarship on technological innovation or technology and development. Similarly, there is a strong legacy of research on media and

development, much of it from the 1960s, in Africa. This scholarship has often focused on the intersection between media and politics and while much of it did notoriously explore the effects of media on 'modernization' there is also a critical legacy of the use of media in nation building or furthering particular political objectives.

In Search of Local Knowledge

One of our striking findings of the second literature review was that there was very little difference between the literature coming from Africa and that of scholars working in the Global North[7]. Determining this line – and what constitutes 'local knowledge' is as challenging as defining evidence. Does it, for example, include African scholars based at European universities? What about American scholars teaching at African universities or on long-term research sabbaticals in Africa?

Determining what constitutes local knowledge may be fraught with ambiguities but the question is an important one. As we argued in our paper, *In Search of Local Knowledge on ICTs in Africa* (Gagliardone et al., 2015), "this initiative recognizes that many of the original insights, paradigms, and motivations for the concepts of peace building and state building have come from the Global North and that Northern institutions have retained "ownership" of knowledge in these areas, often overwhelming Southern voices." In this context, actively seeking out, eliciting, and engaging with local knowledge gives it greater visibility and importance. This is particularly important for the media and studies of media in Africa, as compared with, say, transitional justice that takes a more bottom up approach, are dominated by a focus on technologies, legal frameworks, and policies that are typically defined by actors from the Global North. And despite efforts to emphasize "African solutions to African problems," governance debates are often set by these same actors.

Guided by the approach taken by the Carnegie Corporation's programme, we focused on research, scholarship or policy analysis produced "on Africa by Africans" based either in Africa or abroad. While this approach allowed us to accurately reflect the transnational and global nature of African communities it excluded the many non-African academics, or researchers, who have committed their careers to the continent and may have lived there for many years. We also evaluated the extent to which any of the studies, regardless of the author, included evidence that draws on previous experience and makes use of institutional elements that have been employed locally in the past, interpreting them as a resource rather than as an obstacle to overcome.

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[7] The term Global North is used to refer to richer countries, largely those above the World GDP per capita (at Purchasing Power Parity). As the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs recently argued, authors from these countries dominate intellectual scholarship, including scholarship focusing on less economically developed regions. See http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/publications/ethics_online/0091.

Focusing on literature coming from Africa, however, did little to elucidate local knowledge. There were very few references to how new media could integrate with more localized and contextual governance processes and thus contribute to state-building efforts that were unique to a particular country, group, or location. In some cases, we often found that the research was even more normative or techno-deterministic than research coming from the north. Research agendas in African universities and other institutions have often been influenced by dependence on resources disbursed by donors and NGOs based in the west, which has encouraged academics to fit into frameworks emerging from those countries.[8]

We searched through digital depositories of PhD and Masters theses at institutions such as Addis Ababa University (commendably, these dissertations are also now available online) but we found little difference in the content and scope of evidence in this research than from similar studies in the North. Despite being based in Africa, there was little indication that these studies relied more on empirical evidence than research from the North. In some cases, the opposite appeared to be the case, as research students and faculty at African universities often do not have the financial resources, appropriate training or the luxury of research sabbaticals or lightened teaching loads to engage in sustained data collection.

Many theses would start with widespread assertions about the importance of media in peace building or media as a panacea for the many governance problems in society, with little critical interrogation or data to support the claims. The more mainstream approach in which much of the academic literature may also reflect the desirability of post-study employment at NGOs and other policy organizations, whether the United Nations or the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation that are actively supporting and advancing a particular normative role of media. Similarly, many of the universities are directly supported by international development aid, such as the Norwegian Government's substantial grants to Addis Ababa University's School of Journalism (Skjerdal, 2011) or UNESCO's increasing involvement in supporting curriculum development (UNESCO, 2007).

To some degree this lack of a bottom up approach was acknowledged in the literature. There were critical voices arguing that overly optimistic assumptions about new media's contributions to state building were concealing a preference for Western ideas and interests over local approaches, but there was an absence of studies presenting evidence of how local knowledge was being integrated with new technologies or suggesting whether and how a greater blending of local and global resources and traditions could be achieved. New media's application to governance was considered largely as a new mechanism for articulating rights, and where new

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[8] One potential source of empirical data that did not come up in our literature review and we did not have access to, but that may offer a contrasting perspective, is data and research conducted by corporations. Much of this is not publicly available (that which was, did appear in our review) but must either be bought at corporate prices or is proprietary.

power relationships could be created, rather than as an opportunity to integrate new tools with existing practices. This is not surprising, as most of the literature on governance and state building has either emphasized the importance of building state capacity (something that has been largely privileged by large multi-lateral organizations such as the World Bank) or to increase citizens' ability to hold the state accountable. Perspectives that emphasize hybrid forms of governance or advance the idea of "working with the grain" (Booth, 2011; Gagliardone, 2014), which emphasizes the importance of building on local governance structures and institutions that are often more 'informal', rather than an idealized system of governance, were either marginal in relation to the mainstream debate or have so far been unable, to affect the scholarship and research on media and development.

Implications: Bringing Politics Back In

At present there is both an overwhelming curiosity and euphoria about the potential of new media in poor and violence-affected countries. The widespread assertions of technology as tools of liberation, development, and peace making are slowly becoming tempered by the reality of politics and the context in which they operate. Understanding the role of media in the broader information and political economy ecology is the most pressing challenge for evidence-based policymaking. The push for evidence however, encourages a certain type of research that is as 'scientific' as possible – this approach prioritizes methods such as randomized control trials, public opinion surveys or other quantitative approaches. While these can be helpful in providing some understanding of the impact of media they do little to move us away from more techno-deterministic approaches. Furthermore, some of the studies that have emerged as the most promising in kind of empirical and quantitative data that those seeking evidence require to support claims about the importance of media on development have subsequently been challenged by researchers, oftentimes noting that important contextual factors have been overlooked in the zeal to prove a clear causal relationship between an intervention and a governance outcome. For example, the often cited research by Ritva Reinikka and Jakob Svensson (2006) on the role of media in promoting the transparency of how resources from Uganda's Ministry of Finance were spent in Ugandan education in the 1990s[9] received a robust critique from Paul Hubbard (2007) arguing that concurrent education and fiscal system reforms were equally, if not more, important in explaining the decline in corruption. Thus, he argues that while the information campaign was a contributing factor in reducing corruption, it should not be overestimated and "policy makers should take a nuanced view of the available evidence" (Hubbard, 2007: p. 3). The embrace of popular stories such as the Uganda study reflects the understandable desire on the part of development actors to be able to have clear and relatively straightforward interventions, such as an information campaign, that can have practical impacts. Evidence can often be

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[9] This study was further popularized through Paul Colliers (2007: p. 150) reference to it in the Bottom Billion as a key example of media improving government transparency.

messy, contradictory, and governmental change often relies on a variety of factors, as the Hubbard study argues, thus further complicating the agenda to demonstrate a direct link between media and positive governance outcomes.

The push for evidence-based policymaking has been criticized for marginalizing those that advocate a focus on power, politics, and development. And while there have been some recent efforts to bring in these concerns, including through the JSRP project at the LSE, they are still overlooked, including by many media assistance organizations which contribute so robustly to the grey literature. While these organizations may engage in qualitative methods (including the use of anecdotal evidence for which anthropological, sociological and some political scientists are at times criticized for) there is a tendency to avoid the more critical and controversial issues that are important for understanding context. Media assistance organizations, almost by definition, have a normative view of media where it acts as a fourth estate holding governments to account. It is uncomfortable, and potentially awkward, to recognize that media and journalists are often political actors representing particular politically embedded interests or structures of power that may have precedence over a more recognized role associated with freedom of expression campaigns. Providing media assistance and supporting journalists can be highly political and can fundamentally shape and alter power structures in such a context (and not always towards the 'citizens' or 'civil society' as such organizations may suggest). This has, for example, very much been the case in Somalia (Stremlau, 2013). The majority of media mapping studies have avoided analyzing motivations of media ownership (including who the owners are, their political and economic agendas) and who journalists are. By failing to understand a media system according to its own logic, rules, and objectives, particularly in a media – dense environment such as Somalia, with ongoing violent conflict and a strong legacy of warlord radio having a central role in the violence, it makes media assistance projects that support some media outlets and journalists over others, highly political and potentially counter-productive (Stremlau, 2013).

Finally, there is the significant challenge of how to use evidence, particularly in the media and ICT field. This is already a well-documented issue in other sectors (for example, health and education) but given the fast pace of technological change, it is more pressing in the media field. Serious research is a time intensive effort and many policymakers and media assistance organizations do not have the luxury of waiting for the research or the capacity to act on the findings, particularly if it challenges some of the assumptions underlying their strategy.

Conclusion

The search for evidence has suggested that there is much work to be done to further our understanding of the media in conflict and post conflict environments.

The perspectives of end-users, or those that use technologies, and particularly how this usage interacts with local processes of governance (whether seen through the lens of 'local knowledge' or 'hybrid governance') are missing. Those urging and advocating evidence-based policymaking often stress that multi-disciplinarity is central to developing a solid evidence base (Green, 2013). But in practice, power analysis and more politically aware approaches tend to be overlooked. Consequently, while the evidence based policy movement is important in emphasizing that the ambitious claims made by media development advocates are grounded in realities it must also ensure that it does not marginalize the more controversial or critical voices. Learning from failures, and having the willingness and courage to explore them, particularly in such a rapidly emerging field as new media can offer equally exciting prospects as learning from successes.

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