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Onsite actors' agency within international media development

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Abstract: International efforts aimed at developing a specific region's or country's media sector commonly involve both onsite actors (usually from the Global South) and external actors (usually from the Global North). Dependency theory suggests that onsite actors are (stuck) in a relationship with development agencies and donors in which "Western" notions of journalistic ethics, communication and democracy are imposed on them – and not necessarily to their advantage. Bureaucratic imperatives and institutional dynamics especially within funding agencies have been identified as strong determinants of media development practice. Yet, recent empirical insights point to local actors' ability to assert their own strategies in the face of donor power which can be interpreted as agency. Therefore, this paper suggests making use of structuration theory to get a clearer picture of how onsite actors enact international media development practice. Structuration theory acts on the assumption that social practice is produced and reproduced as part of a dynamic interplay between agency and structure. Applied to media development practice, it allows for the analysis of the intentions and motivations of the agents involved, the conscious or subconscious rules they act upon and also the allocative and authoritative resources at their disposal. Against this background, this contribution presents the methodological design and preliminary results of a qualitative interview study on how onsite actors in the target countries of international media development perceive and negotiate their scope of action. Online interviews were conducted with participants from various world regions such as Middle East, South Asia as well as South-East Asia. The results suggest that the cultivation of long-term relationships and a diversification of international partners allow onsite actors to strengthen their agency within international media development.

Keywords: media development, media assistance, agency, structuration theory, local partners, onsite actors, interview study

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Introduction

So far, research on media development has emphasized the importance of structures in shaping this field of activity. Critical scholars, for instance, point to a structural dependency of countries that receive development support on those who offer this support (see e.g., Manyozo, 2012; Moyo, 2009; Dos Santos, 1970). The economic discrepancy between the two is argued to have an impact on concrete projects and interactions between the actors involved. Recently, a growing number of studies also highlight the agency of actors from the countries that receive media development support (see e.g., Lugo-Ocando, 2020; Segura, 2019). Myers (2018), for instance, describes how Nigerian newspaper editors “talk about being able to ‘circumscribe’, ‘define’, ‘pick and choose’, and that they seem to be able to assert their own strategies in the face of donor power” (p. 38). This raises the question of the power relations (Berger, 2010; Harris, 2018; Segura, 2019) between various media development actors as well as their respective room for maneuver (Lie, 2008).

Against this background, this article aims to take a closer look at the agency of onsite actors within international media development. These could be representatives of media outlets, journalist organizations, domestic universities, or domestic media assistance organizations who cooperate with international, usually Western-led organizations in implementing media development projects onsite in target countries. Price (2002) refers to them as “local partners” in international media development and discerns them from two other groups of actors: intermediary agencies and donors. Yet, whether the term “partnership” aptly describes the relationship between these groups of actors is up for discussion (Engel, 2015). Thus, the more neutral term ‘onsite actors’ is preferred in this paper.

In particular, the paper is interested in the onsite actors’ reasons and motivations for their actions and in how they perceive their ability to initiate, design and steer media development projects. To do so, the author uses Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory as an analytical lens according to which agency is based on capability and knowledgeable. As structuration theory acts on the assumption that agency is always interrelated with structure, this article also takes into account how agency may be enabled or limited by resources and framed by certain rules. After giving a more detailed account of the theoretical underpinnings of structuration theory and reviewing existing research results from media assistance literature for hints to agency and structure, the article turns to an empirical exploration. In the methodology, it describes the conduct of seven interviews with representatives of NGOs that engage locally in media development projects with international partners and funders. What follows is an analysis of the interview data in terms of the interviewees’ knowledgeable and capability. The results show that diversifying their international partners and cultivating long-term relationships serve onsite actors as “authoritative resource” that strengthens their agency within international media development. Besides answering the research question this exploratory study also helps to clarify to what extent structuration theory serves as “sensitizing device” for

deepening our understanding of agency within international media development as well as its limitations and constraints.

Theoretical underpinnings of structuration theory

Structuration theory has been established by Anthony Giddens (1984) in his seminal work “The Constitution of Society”. It can be considered an integrative theory which – by acting on the assumption that human practices develop in an interplay of agency and structures – does not give precedence to either one or another. In this respect, it represents a departure from earlier theories that either emphasized structures as determinants of social practices or lay the focus on individual action without taking into account the relevance of broader structures. Besides its basic assumption that social practices are constantly shaped and re-shaped in an interplay of agency and structure, it offers explanatory approaches of how exactly this happens by drawing attention to four interrelated components: agents’ knowledgeability, their capability, as well as the structural components of rules and resources.

As for agency, Giddens (1984) explains that agents draw upon their knowledge of how the context in which they act is structured. This *knowledgeability* is informed by a *conscious knowledge* (or *discursive consciousness*) – knowledge that can be verbally expressed – and *tacit knowledge* (or *non-conscious knowledge / practical consciousness*) – knowledge that is so integrated in agents’ general understanding of the world and of its social norms as to be hardly recognized. Conscious knowledge “consists of the reasons or motivations able to be expressed by individuals to justify their behaviour” (Edwards, 2016, p. 44), thus involving a rationalization of their actions. This rationalization happens as part of what Giddens (1991) calls *reflexive monitoring* where agents monitor their own actions as well as the settings and contexts in which they undertake them, thus continuously evaluating their appropriateness and success. When harking back to tacit knowledge, however, agents are “relieved” of the need to constantly monitor and assess their own actions as they rather engage in behavioral routines. These routines are based on agents’ knowledge about shared cultural or social norms and about the behavioral expectations these norms imply (Giddens, 1976). According to Giddens (1984) this makes up the larger part of agents’ knowledgeability:

What agents know about what they do, and why they do it – their knowledgeability as agents – is largely carried in practical consciousness. Practical consciousness consists of all the things which actors know tacitly about how to ‘go on’ in the contexts of social life without being able to give them direct discursive expression. (p. xxiii)

As structural elements that either enable or constrain knowledgeability, Giddens (1984) points to rules. By rules he means “techniques or generalisable procedures applied in the enactment/reproduction of social practices” (p. 21). They can be explicitly defined, for instance in the form of laws or codes of conduct, but most of the time they manifest more subtly as socio-cultural rules that entail “informal, implied and unarticulated social expectations” (Edwards, 2016, p. 47). As such, rules are the

basis for behavioral routines and agents may reproduce them with “such consistency that the rules take on an objective property” (Best, 2003, p. 5).

Another important aspect of agency is the agents’ capability which refers to their principal power to alter a course of action. Giddens (1984) describes it as follows:

To be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such interventions, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to ‘make a difference’ to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to ‘make a difference’, that is, to exercise some sort of power. (p. 14)

What Giddens (1984) highlights here is that agents always have some kind of choice within courses of action: they can choose to reproduce actions that have turned out appropriate or successful in a certain context, but they can also choose to act differently in a given setting – possibly modifying a course of action and, thus, altering practices over time. This “power in the sense of transformative capacity” (p. 15) is inherent in every agent.

Capability interacts strongly with resources, the other structural component in addition to rules. The availability of resources has a positive impact on agents’ capability whereas a lack of resources limits their capability. Hence, resources are at the root of power imbalances or dependency (Binder-Tietz, 2022, p. 24). It is not only material, so-called “allocative” resources, such as financial means, products or raw materials, that allows agents to have control over social situations. There are non-physical, so-called “authoritative” resources that enable agents to have an influence on relevant aspects of social situations such as “organisation of time and space, chances for self-development, organisation between people” (Best, 2003, p. 6).

As for its empirical applicability, structuration theory cannot be regarded as a particularly practical tool. Attempts to use it for empirical research have turned out challenging as the theory was conceived with a view to broader societal structures (Kennedy et al., 2021). In fact, Giddens (1984) encourages his readers to understand structuration theory more as “sensitizing devices” (p. 327). There have been efforts to reformulate structuration theory so as to make it more easily applicable, for example by Stones (2005) who developed what he calls “strong structuration theory” by analytically separating the original into smaller specific components. There are quite a few communication scholars, though, who have used structuration theory as a basis for modeling practices in various media-related contexts, for instance the communicative practices of chair persons on supervisory boards (Binder-Tietz, 2022) or of communication experts in innovation management (Zerfaß, 2009). In this article, we stick to Giddens’ (1984) advice to use the elements of structuration theory as sensitizing devices, namely for exploring the agency of onsite actors within international media development.

Literature review: Reflections of agency and structure in research results on international media assistance

When looking at existing research results on media development assistance from a structuration theory perspective, it seems that quite a large amount of literature points to structural factors shaping this field of action. Quite a blatant realization has to do with resources, especially those of an allocative nature, namely that “most media assistance is funded by Western governments” (Miller, 2009, p. 16). In fact, an analysis by the Centre for International Media Assistance (O’Maley, 2018) into donor funding levels shows that the biggest – at least self-reported – shares of financial support to media development stem from European donors (such as the EU Commission with 80,815,000 US Dollars, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency with 42,000,000 US Dollars or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Netherlands with 28,669,400 US Dollars) and US-American donors (such as the Knight Foundation with 25,000,000 US Dollars or the National Endowment for Democracy with 23,406,518 US Dollars). Against this background, the power relations connected to resources have served as a research topic. For instance Phiri and Fourie (2011) studied the “complex relations that exist between the aid-giver and the recipient” (p. 81) based on a case study with recipient organizations of the grant-giving institution Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa (OSISA). They found perceptions of power in OSISA’s grant-giving at three different levels: (1) “the grant-giver [...] obtrusively or systematically pushes for the prioritisation of its own agenda above those of recipient institutions or organisations” (p. 92); (2) “the grant-giver allows the grant recipient some latitude to implement projects within the broad frames of OSISA’s objectives” (p. 93); and (3) “that the grant-giver has no role in determining the priorities of grant recipients” (p. 93). At first sight, the perceptions at level two and three may seem to suggest that grant recipients avail themselves of certain degrees of agency. Phiri and Fourie, however, argue that this conclusion would be misleading as international media assistance *always* happened in a framework of global modernization during which “Africa is slowly being incorporated into the North-Atlantic (or Western) value systems and socio-economic practices” (p. 94). In doing so, Phiri and Fourie act on the assumption that the power to shape media development practice is predominantly with the structure, a position they have in common with other critical scholars (see e.g., Barker, 2008; Tietaah et al., 2018).

Another structural aspect that has been pointed to frequently in the literature on international media development are rules. Rules have mostly been identified in relation to the finding that international media development happens within and is shaped by bureaucratic systems. This is reflected, for instance, in the results of a study by Waisbord (2008). In his analysis of uses of communication approaches in global health programs, the author finds that the selection of a specific approach happens according to bureaucratic requirements, standard institutional procedures and technical mindsets. He cites the example of a rural development project in India where “achieving rapid results within time-bounded funding cycles” (p. 512) was

prioritized over dialogue and negotiation with affected communities as this would have possibly “interfere[d] with the normal functioning of procedures including contracts, program design, scheduling, implementation, and funding” (p. 512). Such bureaucracy-driven procedures have also been identified by Noske-Turner (2017) with respect to the evaluation of international media development programs. After analyzing almost 50 evaluation reports of media development programmes and projects from 2002 until 2012, Noske-Turner finds that there is a “classic model” for an evaluation following specific rules:

It is undertaken at the mid-point or end of the funding cycle, probably by a commissioned consultant who is usually paid for about a three-week period to review the project documents, carry out stakeholder interviews or focus groups and observe the running of the operation, perhaps with some minor additional methods. The types of stakeholders included in interviews (or other similar, qualitative methods) were the donors, the implementing agency staff, partner staff, and trainees or other participants. (pp. 25–26)

Very much in line with the description of rules becoming almost an “objective property” (Best, 2003, p. 5), Noske-Turner (2017) points out that “these methods, procedures, and forms are not deliberately chosen in order to achieve the best possible evaluation, but rather these document-making moments are shaped by the bureaucracy” (p. 26). Already at the very beginning of international media development projects, there seem to be specific rules according to which the actors align their actions. When it comes to the selection of whom to work with locally, Drefs and Thomass (2019) found that a clear media-related profile and “shared democratic values” were crucial criteria for European media development organizations when approaching civil society organizations as potential partners in target regions.

While this existing research tends to emphasize structural factors shaping international media development practice, there are also pointers towards agency as a key concern reflected in existing research results. While the context of international media development may be structured in certain ways, agents most probably have tacit as well as conscious knowledge about this structure and develop capabilities accordingly. Berger (2010), for instance, points out that “much thinking around ‘media development’ operates with a (broadly western-style) democratic agenda” (p. 557). Based on this realization, he argues, onsite actors often develop certain capabilities to boost their own resources: “‘Developees’ become adept at relating to the market for ‘media development’ resources – for example, by either becoming donor-driven, or by proactively ‘selling’ particular services and outcomes to the funders [...]” (p. 556) Lugo-Ocando (2020), too, points to the strategic use of foreign aid by onsite actors who “have constantly found ways of using foreign aid to develop their own news agendas and fostering localized styles and practices all this regardless of the original intention of the donors” (p. 168). An example for this is provided in the study by Segura (2019) who examined the role of foreign aid in shaping communication and media practices, research, education, and policies in Latin America. She observed that donor intentions do not necessarily determine what actors do on the ground: “Most of these institutions, media outlets, civil society organizations and

activists developed a critical understanding of communication and development, even when some of them were initially supported by donors motivated by the modernization paradigm.” (p. 134)

In the light of the reviewed literature, it seems promising to take a closer look at the agency of onsite actors within international media development. While the influence of structural factors on media development practice has been widely considered, we know relatively little about onsite actors’ reasons and motivations for their actions, or how they perceive their ability to initiate, design and steer media development projects. Therefore, we now turn to the methodology for an empirical exploration of these issues.

Methodology

In this article, structuration theory is applied as a “sensitizing device” to analyze data from an exploratory interview study with seven onsite actors engaged in international media development. The interviews were conducted online in July and August 2021 and lasted between 50 and 93 minutes. All interviewees are or have been cooperating with internationally active NGO’s, political foundations or public organizations from Germany that support media development. They are project coordinators or project managers of media (support) organizations in target countries of international media development efforts and are experienced in working with different international or “Western” organizations.

In order to find interviewees, the researcher contacted organizations organized in the German network “Forum Medien und Entwicklung” (fome), informed their respective representatives about the purpose of the study and asked to put the researcher in touch with suitable “local partners”. In this manner, contacts could be established with six partners from three different German organizations. Another contact was established following an online panel discussion organized by the IAMCR working group on “Media Sector Development”. The interviewees hail from three world regions: Three from Middle East, two from South Asia and two from South-East Asia. While three of them were male and four females, all interviewees are referred to in the female form in this paper for anonymity reasons. For the same reason, the interview results are presented without providing further information about the exact affiliation or the living situation of the interviewees.

The researcher got in touch with them via email or messenger app and asked them if they would be willing to participate in a study that is interested in the perspective of people who are engaged in media development projects locally. In an effort to ensure informed consent, the interviewees were provided with a two-page information sheet stating what their participation involves, why it is relevant and how data protection will be ensured. After stating their interest in participating, the interviewees were asked to explicitly give their consent verbally or in a written form to

take part in the study. The seven interviews were conducted based on an interview guide that covered core subjects related to the research question but could be handled flexibly when unknown or unforeseen points were brought up by the interviewees. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, transcribed, and then analyzed.

The analysis was oriented towards the categories *knowledgeability* and *capability* and also considered how these aspects were influenced or constrained by *rules* and *resources*. The interpretation happened in acknowledgement of the fact the interviewees' accounts of actions "do not necessarily reveal the full connection between action and the knowledge that influenced it" (Edwards, 2016, p. 55) as it might be largely based on non-conscious ideas. While methods that prompt reflection – such as interviews – may well be able to transform tacit knowledge into discursive knowledge (Cohen, 1989, p. 27), it was acted on the assumption that a good deal of the interviewees' stated reasons and motivation may require interpretation to carve out the implicit knowledge they are based on.

Results

Knowledgeability – Onsite actors' reasons and motivations

The knowledgeability of onsite actors within international media development is understood here in terms of the reasons and motivations for their actions. In the interviews, these may have been either explicitly expressed in the form of some kind of rationalization of one's actions, or they might have been conveyed implicitly in descriptions of how one goes about one's practical activities.

The interviewees' motivation to engage in media development work with international partners was often described in quite idealistic terms. The interviewees had observed or experienced certain grievances of journalists or their audiences in their country or region and had started to engage in media development projects in order to tackle these deficiencies. One interviewee described, for instance, how the government in her country has closed certain media houses or transferred their ownership to favorable tycoons with shared political interests. In the light of this media concentration, she was worried about the audiences' media diet being one-sided and wanted to develop media projects to "fill in the gap" (Interview 5, pers. comm., August 5, 2021). Another interviewee described her frustrations, when working herself as a journalist in her country, caused by a lack of appreciation for her investigative work from the editors in chief. This, she said, was different when working with international partners: "So for me, to cooperate with international media, [with] NGOs, it was like, it's one step forward, to [...] respect, to recognize your work. That that was actually the motive." (Interview 1, pers. comm., July 1, 2021).

While motives that fit a "Western democratic agenda" were indeed detectable in

many of the interviews, some interviewees also pointed out that this agenda is well-known to opportunists and that international actors should pay more attention to their onsite partners' sincerity to the cause. One interviewee, for instance, told of a person who "used to work for a US media think tank and was responsible for a lot of input in media-related legislation and now he has a shop, selling children's toys" (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021). Another interviewee mentioned that she knows "a person who has twelve NGO's, for everything he has an NGO" (Interview 1, pers. comm., July 1, 2021) emphasizing that some people just "sell" the "Western" partners whatever they are willing to provide funds for.

The extent to which the interviewees' themselves act in ways that can be considered donor-driven cannot be determined for sure. Yet, there are clear hints in the interviews that the interviewees have also become more knowledgeable of the "rules of the game" as they were gaining more and more experience as actors within international media development. How they act upon these perceived rules, however, can take many different forms. For one interviewee, the perceived rule that "you have to be professional" when working with international partners caused a lot of pressure when she faced difficulties running a project by herself without having experienced personnel available: "The problem is that organizations like mine cannot just, you know, tell the donor everything that we're going through, because they will think that you are incapable of delivering well." (Interview 2, pers. comm., July 28, 2021). Another interviewee had acquired a more distanced attitude towards the expectations she sensed from their international partners' side in terms of professionalism: "I've always said to our partners that I am not a professional, and the organization that I run and my team, we are not professionals. We are human beings interested in bringing about an attitudinal change in the environment that we are living in." (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021)

In another case, the rules and requirements connected to media development practice have caused the interviewee's NGO to come up with specialized divisions: The interviewee, its Director, pointed to, for example, a dedicated finance team that "has read all the guidelines and so they know about the requirements" (Interview 5, pers. comm., August 5, 2021) or a resource mobilization department that is in charge of writing proposals. Most of the interviewees emphasized that while they acknowledge the existence and possibly also the justification of certain rules established by their partners – for instance, the expectation that media development projects have to have an impact – they appreciate it when the related procedures are handled flexibly. One interviewee, for instance, stated that, to her, impact does not necessarily have to refer to the broader media sector, but can also happen at a smaller scale: "There have also been projects that we have conducted that have had zero impact outside, but have had a lot of impact on our internal team. That, for me, is also an impact." (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021) Several interviewees pointed out that a lack of flexibility and blindly sticking to rules can actually lead to a waste of resources. One example given was a case where a large number of bulletproof vests were bought and given out to media houses even though such vests were actually

available. At the very point in time when the external organization had assessed the needs of media workers in this target country, journalists would just not be keen on wearing their heavy vests due to hot weather in this seasonally hot and dry region. The organization, however, jumped to the conclusion that there must be a lack of vests. The interviewee explained:

So because they [international partner organization] had acquired funding under this head, they could not move that money from one budget head to another. So, we were compelled to buy bulletproof vests when they were already there. Now, you know, that's a waste of resources. (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021)

Against this background, especially bureaucratic requirements were taken with a pinch of salt by most interviewees. The interviewees seemed very conscious about the existence of these rules, but at the same time knowledgeable enough to deal with them in ways that seem most appropriate to them: "Everyone knows that it does not make sense. But everyone is happy because the form is filled." (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021) This takes us to the aspect of capability and the possibility to "act otherwise".

Capability - Perceived ability to initiate, design and steer media development projects

Indeed, the interviews revealed instances where the interviewees dealt with the aforementioned rules by using their power to "act otherwise". One example provided in the interviews referred to preparing a report to the funder, not subsequent, but prior to a training workshop because the desired outputs and outcomes of this activity had been pre-defined anyway. Another example concerned filling in monitoring and evaluation sheets about a project that did not end up having the desired impact: "Yeah, well, [...] then you get into problems and then you fake it." (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021) These examples show that when it comes to bureaucratic procedures onsite agents make use of their capability to a certain degree, yet not necessarily by trying to alter the structural conditions as such, but rather by circumventing them. This seemed to be attributed to an imbalance in allocative resources. Quite a few interviewees shared the impression that the bigger and the better-funded the institutions they deal with, the more complex their bureaucracy. In light of this, they can feel as if their capability to make a difference to the situation is limited and the expectations connected to it non-negotiable. In situations where there is less of an imbalance of resources, however, onsite actors seemed more comfortable to address deviations from the norms more openly – for instance with direct cooperation partners from international NGOs. One interviewee shared her experience with a long-term partner with whom she can address issues head-on, where they were able to transform the situation together:

We had a meeting yesterday, and I told them that because of the situation in [country], I will have some issues, you know, when it comes to paying the staff and all of that, because of the economic crisis, and the currency inflation and all of that. And they were like: Okay, don't worry, whenever you face a problem, please tell us and we'll try to find a solution. (Interview 2, pers. comm., July 28, 2021)

In this situation, she seemed to be able to rely on her authoritative resources as the one who has proven knowledge of the local context compared with the external partner. This expertise of onsite agents on the conditions on the ground and their practical implications for projects was something that emerged across several interviews as a source of capability. As one interviewee put it when she talked about designing projects: “I mean, they [donors or partners] rely on us because we are the ones to implement. We know what can be done and what cannot be done.” (Interview 5, pers. comm., August 5, 2021)

On the other hand, the interviews also revealed instances where the interviewees took opportunities out of financial need even though parts of the staff were not convinced about the project. This happened, for instance, where media development projects are intended to encourage news reporting on certain topics while the journalists on the ground are not particularly interested in covering these issues:

The journalists, the editorial team, they have their own way of thinking. And sometimes, if we ask them to implement the project, they say: It’s kind of boring. You know, but to get the income or to sustain our organization, we have to take [the funding offer]. (Interview 5, pers. comm., August 5, 2021)

These cases clearly reveal a certain dependency due to an imbalance in allocative resources between onsite actors and funders. At the same time, it became obvious that within the negotiation of allocative resources, the onsite actors weigh up their benefits carefully. In many cases, such considerations are actually part of a dedicated strategic planning process during which they review potential international donors or partners active in their field, get in touch pro-actively, invite them to events and initiative discussions about funding opportunities: “We try to develop our own strategy. What is the issue we want to address? What is our big concern? And we are well aware of the mandates of the [potential] development partners.” (Interview 7, pers. comm., August 11, 2021)

At times, onsite media development actors themselves are approached by international organizations. This, however, does not necessarily mean that they jump at the opportunity. If, for instance, the bureaucracy attached to a certain funding opportunity seems too time-consuming and the funder is known to be rather inflexible, many an interviewee considered it a waste of their own organization’s resources. Besides thinking twice whether or not to cooperate with a certain international partner or funder in the first place, the interviewed actors also pointed to instances where they stopped working with certain international partners. In one example given, this happened “silently and politely” (Interview 6, pers. comm., August 9, 2021) after the international partner was perceived as displaying a patronizing attitude: “They were treating us like we are on the receiving end and they are like the upper hand.” (Interview 6, pers. comm., August 9, 2021) In this case, the interviewee’s organization was able to rely on a stable network of diverse project partners, that is, she was in a position with stable allocative resources, which allowed her to do without a particular partnership.

In another example, an interviewee walked out of a running project because it put her authoritative resources, namely her organization's reputation among the local community, at risk. The international partner had insisted on the requirements that workshop participants have to state their national identity card number upon registration. As this information is regarded as very sensitive by the local population, the interviewee considered it inappropriate to ask for it. She reacted by saying: "This is not happening. This cannot happen. I cannot stake my organization's reputation just so because you have to fill out a form." (Interview 3, pers. comm., July 29, 2021) In these cases, the power to "act otherwise" even lead to a termination of the cooperation.

Summary and conclusion

This article's objective was to find out about the agency of onsite actors within international media development. So, what can be concluded about these actors' knowledgeability and capability in practicing media development? Overall, the exploratory interviews indicate that onsite media development actors display knowledgeability about the rules that structure the context in which they act. They know that international media development offers a field of action that allows them to strive for their idealistic goals. Motives like fighting media capture or enabling investigative reporting go well with the democratic agenda of international media development organizations and their funders which indicates that also from the perspective of onsite actors "shared democratic values" (Drefs & Thomass, 2019) are a fundamental building block for media development partnerships. Whether onsite actors' democratic values are genuine or displayed to serve as an advantage in the competition for media development resources, however, was raised as an issue that requires scrutiny. After all, the interviewees' doubts about other local actors' sincerity to the cause confirms Berger's (2010) problematization of the media development sector as a market for resources. Yet, even for "genuine" actors' media development serves as a source of revenue. Thus, they are very much aware of the expectations and bureaucratic requirements attached to this field of action. The way they act upon them ranges from embracing these rules and aligning one's own organizations' structures accordingly to playing along while not actually subscribing to them or even opposing them. Especially when it comes to structures that have been installed by other actors to whom there is quite a big imbalance in allocative resources, onsite partners seemed to prefer to circumvent rules they find hard or annoying to fulfill, rather than questioning them openly. This finding implicates an important realization for those actors who are rich in allocative resources, such as governmental organizations or private foundations who fund media development programmes. In the quest for improved effectivity and impact, a lot of them have introduced managerialist-inspired funding conditions and formalized procedures for monitoring and evaluation (Elbers et al., 2014). Yet, when onsite actors don't see a chance to question the appropriateness of such conditions and procedures in their local contexts, they might just work around them and – in doing so – reduce them to absurdity.

In other situations, especially when onsite actors' positions are strengthened by a good deal of authoritative resources, they make strategic use of their capability. Onsite actors' local expertise and a network of long-term and diverse partners can work as authoritative resources which give them leverage in shaping projects and, in extreme cases, even allow them to make a difference by even ending a partnership. As far as allocative resources are concerned, the power imbalance between external organizations who give out funds and onsite organizations who receive them cannot be denied. While this, at times, prompts onsite actors to take on projects that not everybody in their team is particularly interested in, many seem to base such decisions on broader strategic considerations intended to benefit their organization overall and to enable other concrete endeavors they want to undertake. The question arises whether an open and argument-based discussion about the relevance and urgency of specific funding lines wouldn't be more beneficial for all parties involved within this interplay of onsite actors' authoritative resources and international organizations' or donors' allocative resources. It would allow onsite actors to explain why certain issues are higher on their agenda than others. Likewise, it would help donors to avoid funding projects that do not have local ownership.

As this exploration shows, using the elements of Giddens' structuration theory as a lens for analyzing international media development practice with a focus on onsite actors turned out quite revealing. It allowed for a detailed account of the knowledgeable ability of onsite actors' when dealing with the manifold rules they are faced with. Furthermore, it was helpful in identifying the complex interplay between various resources and onsite actors' capability. Overall, it sensitizes us for the fact that even though structural elements have their bearing on international media development practice, the knowledgeable ability and capability of onsite actors should not be underestimated. At the practical level of media development, this should stimulate reflections on how to ensure that the knowledgeable ability and capability of onsite media development actors is not wasted on circumventing certain rules or on "window-dressing" when projects turn out different than originally planned, but on modifying and transforming practices if needed. A study by Elbers and Arts (2011) confirms that "funding part of the budget themselves, or [...] bringing multiple donors to the negotiation table" (p. 726) makes Southern NGO's more likely to try and influence problematic donor conditions – along with "a degree of personal contact and trust" (p. 726). Overall, it seems worthwhile to use structuration theory in future more wide-ranging examinations of international media development practice to describe the interrelation between structure and agency more precisely and identify potential patterns or neuralgic situations that can cause changes.

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