

'Fragmented media, fractured states: do media development interventions ignore theories of state development?'

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ABSTRACT

Efforts to facilitate the development of free and independent media have been significant features of democracy support strategies, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Critics of these efforts have argued that, particularly when introduced in fragile states and settings, they are modelled on replicating western ideals of journalism in political, social and economic settings not well suited to them; that they ignore the complex realities of existing power and patrimonial relationships in society; and that they fail to take into account historical experience and current theories of state development. As a consequence, it is argued, they risk accentuating state instability, fuel division and conflict in society and act as a brake on state development. Current, accelerating trends towards greater fragmentation of media and communication channels, including in fragile states, raise further questions of whether media and communication are, as media development proponents claim, an essential source of government accountability and a central pillar of an informed and democratic society or, alternatively, a driver reinforcing fracture points in already deeply fractured states. This paper examines these issues with particular reference to current theories of state development.

Introduction: the problems posed to media development by theories of state development

Recent theories of state development (North et al, *Violence and Social Orders*, 2009) have argued that the process of state formation in developing countries differs fundamentally from that in developed countries. Models of state development, argue North and colleagues, are better identified through an analysis of how states have emerged through human history, rather than those that are found in the West (North et al 2006..)

The conclusions drawn from such analysis suggest that the absence of violence and the existence of political stability essential to the formation of a functioning state depend fundamentally on the existence of “limited access orders”, where political institutions and other instruments of power are held by small numbers of powerful individuals. In order for those individuals to create rents from the political institutions they control, they have a strong incentive to reduce violence and undesirable instability in society. The existence of such limited access orders is, argue the authors, much more characteristic of many developing country societies, particularly those in the early formation of state development, than is what they consider to be a largely cosmetic and imagined political evolution to western style democracy. The evolution of the Open Access Orders characteristic of western industrialised countries is in the context of human historical development, something of an anomaly. External efforts to open up and democratise societies, it is argued, can potentially undermine and destabilise the delicate power dynamics necessary for the emergence of stable and

sustainable states and create non rational power relationships, a view backed up by other critics of efforts to assist or promote democracy [e.g. Khan]. They also echo deep seated policy debates around democratic sequencing between skeptics of democracy assistance fearful that it encourages both interstate and civil tension and violence, and those who argue that (while distancing themselves from recent US government policy) that democratic renewal is the most effective path from politically unsustainable authoritarianism. [Carothers July 2007]

The issues surrounding the evolution, role and analysis of the role of media and communication within these debates have been comparatively lightly addressed. While arguments such as those of North pose a profound challenge to both the theories and practice of democratic development followed by most western donors and powers, they create a special one for those who have urged strong investment in the creation of free and plural media in developing countries as part of democratic support strategies. This challenge is especially pertinent at a time when the failure of elections and formal procedural components of the development process to deliver sustainable political settlement [Collier 2009] is leading to renewed interest in the role of media and communication in bolstering a democratic culture capable of breathing life into formal democratic structures.¹

The potential of media and communication to undermine both formal state control and informal client patron relationships has been well documented over many years. The force of communicative power has been recognised across a long theoretical spectrum, ranging from those democracy scholars who argue that the disruption of existing elite control of power is necessary for sustainable political settlements to emerge (Kaldor 2007) through to those who argue that the dangers of conflict in fragile states is such that the development of a functioning state capable of delivering political stability should, at least on some occasions, override other considerations.

While there is a voluminous literature arguing for the positive democratic power of a liberalised and plural media system, there is a much smaller, but still very significant academic tradition challenging the benefits of such media in fragile states. In 1996, in the journal *International Security*, Professor Jack Snyder of the Institute of War and Peace Studies at Colombia University and his colleague, Karen Ballentine, concluded in a precursor to North's conclusion, that:

The conventional wisdom among human rights activists holds that a great deal of the ethnic conflict in the world today is caused by propagandistic manipulations of public opinion.

As antidotes, such groups prescribe democratization, wide-open debate in civil society, and greater freedom of the press.(1) Scholars likewise argue that a major stimulus to belligerent nationalism is the state's manipulation of mass media and mass

¹ In remarks made to the Salzburg Global Seminar in July 2008, Professor Paul Collier argued that, "Elections work to discipline governments in two dimensions: honesty and effective policies, both of which are very important. But, they only work if life is breathed into those institutions, and the process of breathing life into those institutions is basically having an informed and organized society. A free and active media delivers both of those. It informs the society and it helps the society to organize around things that really matter....There is a really good case for public money to go into this effort."

education to infuse the nation with a sense of in-group patriotism and out-group rivalry.(2) They, too, prescribe greater freedom of speech.(3)

We argue that promoting unconditional freedom of public debate in newly democratizing societies is, in many circumstances, likely to make the problem worse. Historically and today, from the French Revolution to Rwanda, sudden liberalizations of press freedom have been associated with bloody outbursts of popular nationalism. The most dangerous situation is precisely when the government's press monopoly begins to break down.(4) During incipient democratization, when civil society is burgeoning but democratic institutions are not fully entrenched, the state and other elites are forced to engage in public debate in order to compete for mass allies in the struggle for power.(5) Under those circumstances, governments and their opponents often have the motive and the opportunity to play the nationalist card.

As a result of their analysis the authors urge “NGOs and other aid donors to reconsider projects to provide ethnic minorities with their own media”.

In 2005, the London School of Economics produced an influential report, based on a workshop organised with the Annenberg School of Communication (Putzel 2005). It concluded that

“The workshop was based on the proposition that attention to the role of the media needs to be at the heart of efforts to consolidate security, effective government and development in the wake of crises and war. In situations where the state is fragile, however, and where the political process is unstable and de-legitimated, the primary objective of donor assistance should be supporting the formation of a functioning state. In such a scenario, unsophisticated liberalisation of the media can potentially undermine the state building project. The creation and sustaining of independent media is central to theories of democratisation. However, in the case of fragile states, it may also be misguided and potentially dangerous to assume that encouraging the creation of free and independent media will automatically strengthen civil society, or help establish a democratic system that will hold governments accountable. This approach underestimates the complexity of the contexts of fragile states.”

Other critics echo this theme, arguing in effect that much international support for media presupposes that the media's role will be essentially be the same in conditions of limited access orders as it is in open access orders. Allen and Stremlau point to a statement by the international media support organisation, IMPACS, that “at its best, media is the safeguard of democratic governance [and] at its best it means accurate and balanced reporting which fairly represents a diversity of views sufficient for the public to make well-informed choices” critiquing it thus:

As with so much of the literature, the starting point here is the benefits of the media at ‘optimal performance – i.e. in rich democracies. From the perspectives of Iraq, Rwanda or Afghanistan [IMPACs] comment about less ‘optimal environments’ seems rather naïve. In such places, the media may not be restrained by the kinds of institutionalised legal and other mechanisms available in the US or the UK. Certainly the media can, and often do, have a much more significant impact than just providing “information about humanitarian initiatives” – one that is just as likely to be detrimental as positive. The Rwandan government’s Milles Collines radio station was after all partly a product of an internationally supported peace and democratisation project. Yet, in almost all of [IMPACs] ‘less optimal environments’ proponents of

free expression are deeply reluctant to concede situations where restricting the media may be appropriate except in the most blatant or dire of circumstances”.

Taken together, these and other critics of the normative assumptions said to underpin much support for free media in fragile states, suggest a strong foundation for debate and response from the media development community. Several remarks may be made in this respect.

First, such a debate has not in fact taken place. Organisations who exist to support media development make up an increasingly well organised and clearly identifiable sector. According to the Global Forum for Media Development, for example, more than 300 organisations in more than 100 countries support the development of media, and two recent conferences of GFMD attracted more than 1,000 participants. Evidence of substantive engagement with such critiques by those within the media development community is scant. The international community of organisations seeking to support media freedom is also a substantial one (and there is much crossover between the two). The policy, sectoral and academic fora where such critiques can be substantively aired and debates with organisations that exist to support media in developing countries, often in the context of an explicit set of democratic assumptions and norms, do not obviously exist.

Second, normative assumptions held by the international media development community of the importance to good governance appear to be largely shared within the development policy community. In 2009, the BBC World Service Trust commissioned a study, *Governance and the Media: a survey of policy opinion*. In a detailed set of interviews with more than 20 senior representatives from the Democratic Governance departments of international development organisations, and with key academic figures in the governance field, there was a strong consensus of the continued importance of media to governance.

“The importance of supporting free and pluralistic media in relation to governance - and development outcomes - is thought to be increasingly recognised by a wide range of policy makers, academics and practitioners. Despite this, ‘there is an ‘engagement gap’ between the value assigned to its role ... and the practical provision made for it in development planning, thinking and spending.”

Most major policy statements from organisations within the formal development sector support, at least rhetorically, the importance of the evolution of a free and plural media capable of holding government to account and enabling an informed citizenry. (e.g. Dfid White Paper 2009, Sida 2009).

Third, because there appear to be few policy or academic fora where arguments used in support of media development, and those that critique them, can be aired, debated and challenged that the role of media in democratic governance is considered too political, messy and difficult to be the subject of serious policy analysis and attention. While issues of media in democratic governance and as a shaper of political settlements is considered to be of high policy value by the formal democratic and development communities featuring visibly in many policy statements, it is generally quite a low policy priority (the number of personnel within the entire formal aid system of bilateral and multilateral actors explicitly tasked with engaging with and supporting media as democratic governance issues has been estimated by this author to be less than dozen and arguably less than half a dozen). Lack of policy clarity, learning and debate around the role of media in fragile states is, it is suggested, partly a

consequence of a good deal of confusion on the part of policy actors of what the evidence actually tells them of the role of media.

Finally, partly as a consequence of the lack of substantive debate in this area, the policy options appear to be strongly bifurcated and confused. The recommendations made by those who critique media development frequently focus on legitimising a degree of censorship or control of media and that, particularly in situations of conflict and state fragility, media that is too rapidly liberalised and allowed too much freedom can undermine stability, foster conflict and, at their most extreme, aid genocide. To avoid such danger, it is argued, the media should be constrained until the state has become sufficiently stable and the institutions of the state sufficiently strong, to withstand such pressure [Allen and Stremmlau 2005, Putzel 2005]. Those who defend its role argue that opening up media is worth the risk - that media are essential to any democratic transition, that even in the most fragile states they are fundamental to enabling an informed citizenry, in acting on behalf of the citizen to hold power to account and in the platform for public discourse necessary for democracy to work.

The central question posed by this paper is whether a more structured debate is needed which is informed by but nevertheless complements traditional debates in this area that have been largely focused on underlying normative assumptions of liberal democratic values and media freedom.

It is argued in the next section that media and communication trends are such that control over the media and other communication systems is increasingly unfeasible, particularly in fragile states with weak state capacities.

In the next section, it is argued that the realities shaping media and communication ecologies are changing extremely rapidly, and that many of the drivers of these changes are not easily amenable to influence of government policy. Using the contrasting arguments of the role of media in fuelling violence in Rwanda and Kenya, it is argued that the connections between media and violence are not necessarily amenable simply to better or more informed regulation, and the drivers of media behaviour that foster conflict are becoming increasingly complex, decentralised and unpredictable. They are increasingly being internally as well as externally driven and commercial and technological factors are far stronger than just a few years ago. Political, policy and governmental responses are becoming more limited (although far from irrelevant).

A more constructive debate that brings together competing perspectives on the role of media in fragile states to address the increasingly complex reality of the remorseless decentralisation and fragmentation of media may be long overdue, and a more structured contest of ideas may be essential to illuminating future policy in this area.

From Rwanda to Kenya: the character of media and communication access in the 21st Century

Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines' role in fuelling the 1994 Rwanda genocide is well and multiply documented [Frère] and there is not space here to delve deeply into its history. However, RTLM's terrible role in the genocide prompted much of the limited academic and policy debate that there has been internationally about the justification for curtailing the rights of media in situations where the state is fragile. The emergence of Mille

Collines and its subsequent role in the violence was a product, at least in part according to Allen and Stremlau, to international pressure to liberalise Rwanda's media system². While the role of media policy in the emergence of RTLM is debated, the background to its emergence was an explosion of print media, almost all titles of which were allied to specific parties, and to the threat perceived by the Hutu led government of a loss of monopoly control over broadcasting. It emerged too against a background of an increasingly partial, fragmented and radicalised media sector. The reality of media by 1993 when RTLM was formed, was shaped in part by some external factors (including a new propaganda station, Radio Muhabura, run by the Tutsi led RPF from across the border in Uganda) but it was fundamentally created by the politics of the country.

Fifteen years later, another well publicised example of the role of media in fostering violence took place in Kenya during the 2007 elections and their aftermath. The scale of the violence was small by comparison to Rwanda and political comparisons between the two episodes are extremely problematic (and deeply resented by many Kenyans). However, the distinction between the drivers of media's role in two cases may be instructive and relevant to specific challenges faced in understanding the links between media and violence in the 21st Century.

The principal drivers of RTLM's behaviour were political but, it is argued, if external pressure had been less one of liberalising, democratising and opening media in the country to one of careful containment, including through censorship, an internal policy environment might have been created that at least limited the capacity of a station like RTLM to emerge³. While the author of this paper questions this, feeling that RTLM emanated less, ultimately, from a set of international pressures to liberalise media and more as a carefully organised propaganda arm of a carefully orchestrated genocidal machine and that very little in the way of external intervention (training, codes of ethics, regulatory pressure and guidance etc) would have changed that. Nevertheless, for all its problems, this is a policy debate that was (and is) worth having..

The drivers shaping the role of media in Kenya's violence were, however, more complex, combining to a much greater extent technological and commercial factors as well as political ones. They suggest that the political, technological and market forces driving the decentralisation of media and communication structures in society are becoming remorselessly more powerful and interlinked, and that efforts by governments or others to contain and constrain those forces are probably less and less feasible.

In Kenya in January 2008, a few days after the start of the violence following the disputed December 27 2007 election, evidence began to emerge that local language radio stations were being blamed for fuelling the violence [Abdi and Deane 2008]. These radio stations had come into existence largely since 2004 when, in response to largely commercial pressure, the Kibaki government passed a new law enabling a fresh wave of liberalisation. This allowed, for the first time, significant numbers of local language FM radio stations to come into

² According to Allen and Stremlau in a footnote, "the signing of the Arusha accords in 1993 enacted a power sharing agreement between the Hutus and Tutsis supervised by the United Nations. High on the agenda for the transition was the integration of the armies, the return of refugees and the development of free media, all of which would culminate in the 1995 multi-party elections.

³ This author questions this, feeling that RTLM emanated less, ultimately, from a set of international pressures to liberalise media and more as a carefully organised propaganda arm of a carefully orchestrated genocidal machine - very little in the way of external intervention (training, codes of ethics, regulatory pressure and guidance etc) would have changed that.

existence. Until this time, the only source of broadcast information available to communities who conversed in languages other than Swahili or English (such as Kalenjin and Luo), was from the government broadcaster, KBC – a case of what might, in relation to the media, be called a Limited Access Order. KBC commanded little or no trust or credibility among most of these communities who felt that they had been marginalised from political and economic power for much of the history of post independence Kenya.

The 2004 liberalisation was prompted by pressure from major commercial operators keen on exploiting an increasingly viable advertising market in what was a rapidly expanding economy. The audience for these stations, however, were not principally interested in acting as an advertising market. They saw, for the first time, the creation of a public platform aired in their own language capable of reflecting the concerns and grievances that had built up for years and which formed the principal focus for political tension in the country. A plethora of commercial radio stations established largely as entertainment vehicles found as a consequence themselves moderating extremely highly charged political debates as people who had felt excluded from public debate for generations. Because these were commercial operations, those hired as talk show hosts were largely comedians, entertainers and other personalities ill suited and untrained in moderating such conflicted conversations. The most extreme political voices in society found it easy in such circumstance to come on air and urge slaughter.

Added to this mix was the explosion of mobile telephony increasing ubiquity of mobile telephony and the traditional perception of broadcast media as a one to many communication vehicle was increasingly transformed into a horizontally networked, highly interactive many to many form of communication.

The increasing ubiquity of mobile telephony was an important factor in Kenya's economic growth (not least the country being a global pioneer in new mobile services such as mobile banking). During the violence however, the deployment of virally disseminated text messages designed to inflame ethnic tension and urge violence was widespread. Online social media sites also found themselves having to shut down their community and discussion boards because they did not have the capacity to monitor and edit the onslaught of hate messages being posted.

This highly condensed account of the Kenya experience suggests at first sight that the consequence of the liberalisation of local language stations was highly characteristic of the dangers to which critics of liberalisation have pointed to in the past. However, while the liberalisation of the media was almost certainly unsophisticated and occurred under an ineffective regulatory system, it is not clear that maintaining a situation in which broadcast local language broadcasting remaining a monopoly of the government controlled Kenya Broadcast Corporation was politically sustainable. Neither Swahili nor English are truly national languages in Kenya and a significant minority of people speak neither. The 2007 election, and the violence that followed it, were substantially driven by fundamental issues of political and economic marginalisation and distrust of a government that large parts of the population felt was governing against their interests. KBC was perceived (rightly, in the view of external independent reviews as the propaganda mouthpiece of government. The pressure for liberalisation of media in Kenya was not principally driven from outside of the country by media support, press freedom organisations or international donors (although all of these factors did exist) – it was largely driven by internal commercial and political pressures of

which commercial factors and the desire to open new advertising markets was probably a dominant factor.

Most analysis [Deane, Article 19, International Media Support] of the role of media during the Kenya crisis concludes that much of the media's role in fuelling violence was easily preventable. Most concrete media capacity building support within the country in years in advance of the elections had been focused on issues such as HIV/AIDS education. While there were some strong media support activities commissioned by UNDP around the election, these were limited in scope and, in particular, in timescale. Very little (arguably no) serious engagement was held with local language radio stations and talk shows. Codes of ethics, training for talk show hosts or substantive analysis or debate of the content of local language radio stations was largely lacking.⁴

The drivers shaping the use and capture of media in Kenya were substantively different from those in Rwanda and, in terms of the extent of the complex interaction between political, technological and market forces, increasingly typical of the reality of media ecologies in most fragile states. Similar examples of the capture and cooption of media for the purposes of fuelling hate are on the rise in many other countries (ref. Cote d'Ivoire...etc)

Some Conclusions

While there is evidence in the Kenya case to back up most of the arguments used by both media development/freedom organisations as well and their critics, three conclusions are suggested from the Kenya case particularly with relevance to theories of state development.

First, the decentralisation and fragmentation of communication in a country such as Kenya is near inevitable and is increasingly being driven by complex market and technological forces, as well as political ones. It is not now principally being driven by external actors, although these are not unimportant. The ubiquity of communication channels in society represented by the remorseless penetration of mobile telephony combined with the steady liberalisation and increasing interactivity of traditional media, make the notion of maintaining serious central control of communication channels increasingly difficult. Media's role in the Kenya violence was not planned as it was in Rwanda, and was largely undeliberate and the consequence of chance and chaos. There is very little evidence to suggest that the talk show hosts or their managers or even their owners were actively complicit in planning or implementing a programme designed to foster ethnic hatred. This accidental, chaotic, unmapped character of Kenya media in the 21st century is, arguably, far more typical of media trends in other fragile states than the case of Rwanda's RTLM was. The degree to which government can control such trends whilst retaining even a semblance of legitimacy is deeply questionable.

In other words, a set of communication conditions exist now that have never existed before in human historical experience on which theories such as those of Douglass C. North are based.

⁴ To the extent that there had been international engagement with local language radio stations, this was controversial. Kass FM, a Kalenjin language station particularly accused of fuelling violence following the 2007 election had been closed down by the government following charges that it incited ethnic hatred around the 2005 referendum campaign in Kenya. It was reopened following, at least in part, accusations by international media freedom organisations that the charges of ethnic hatred were based on too limited evidence.

There are a set of trends and conditions which are, as North et al imply⁵, fundamentally reshaping of the capacity to structure society on the basis of Limited Access Orders.

Second, this decentralisation and fragmentation of communication is not necessarily equivalent to the democratisation of communication channels. Current research seems inadequate for us to conclude whether these fundamentally changed communication systems are in fact leading to an inevitable transition to societies based on Open Access Orders or whether highly decentralised communication systems are increasingly being used as proxies for the elite negotiation of power. There is increasing evidence to support the view that, particularly in fragile states, we are seeing the decentralisation rather than democratisation of communicative power.

There are many and oft cited cases of communication becoming an increasingly democratic medium where communicative power is placed in the hands of the ordinary citizen to hold power to account, organise to overthrow repressive regimes and to engage in enlightened public debate. This is not necessarily the reality, particularly in fragile and fractured states. There is at least as much evidence that communication trends are decentralising in ways that lead to a congregation of communication actors on either sides of the fracture points in society which are subject to political capture by the most extreme members existing on either sides of those fracture points. Media trends point to both print and broadcast media increasingly being owned explicitly by government or opposition groups, or other political, religious, ethnic or other sectors in society. Definitions of free and independent media remain

⁵ The particular challenges of media and communication to the existence of Limited Access Orders were addressed by North (North et al: *Limited Access Orders in the Developing World, A New Approach to the Problems of Development, Policy Research Working Paper 4359, World Bank 2007*).

“Communications technology is particularly noteworthy, not only because it facilitates production and is itself an item of consumption, but because it is essential to forming and sustaining organizations. Improvement in communications technology has multiple and contradictory effects on the two development problems and on the freedom of ordinary people.

For example, enhancing the ability of people to form organizations and to coordinate can help a state move along the progression of LAOs. Freedom of speech and the press was critical to the historical emergence of OAOs. The introduction of radio and then TV in the early and mid-twentieth century made it a lot easier for people in LAOs to get information, including about what was happening in the world and what other people were saying about it. This information allowed them to compare more readily their own circumstances and their leaders’ performance relative to the alternatives. These media have also made it easier for elites to disseminate their views to the masses.

For much of the twentieth century, monopoly control over the radio and television media by the state allowed the dominant coalition to use these technologies to their advantage. Further, new technologies always provide a new potential source of rents, thereby potentially strengthening the dominant coalition by allowing them to add new members to the coalition without diminishing the benefits of the existing members. Privatization of Mexican telephones shows that this can be a tool of the LAO (See Haber et al. 2007).

More recent changes in communications technology seem to be undermining state control. Television and radio media did not do nearly as much to facilitate communications exchanges among non-state organizations because they lack the ability to support back and forth communication that is essential for organizations. The telephone did, although on a sequential one-on-one basis, with high costs for longer-range conversations (before the cell-phone).

The internet and cell phones on the other hand provide a significant increase in interactive communication, and we have yet to understand their full potential. Large groups of people in geographically separated locations can now participate in the conversation at low cost.

This form of communication potentially increases citizens’ coordination in ways that can have big effects on governments in LAOs.”

loose and arguably inadequate when restricted to simply constituting a level of independence from government. Fragmentation of media and communication systems are arguably far more advanced in countries characterised by Open Access Orders, particularly in the United States, but here the potential of such fragmentation to drive group polarisation, societal dis-integration and radical extremism is a subject of substantial debate [Sunstein 2009]. In societies that are already fragile and fractured, the implications for further fracturing and dis-integration are especially acute.

Third, if, as this paper suggest, much of this fragmentation is not easily amenable to policy intervention then the question becomes less one of whether media and communication sectors become more open and decentralised, but more one of how. The current apparent lack of engagement by international development actors in this issue (both policy and academic) is puzzling given the obvious force of media and communicative power in shaping political settlements. A useful common ground between different actors in the debates highlighted above could focus less on arguments around normative assumptions and more on what strategic interventions might work given their contrasting theoretical perspectives and practical experiences.

Fourth, to the extent that this decentralisation of communicative power is undermining limited access orders and the capacity to retain power among a small group, we have little evidence guiding us as to their effects on state stability. The neopatrimonial systems [Cammack 2007] that increasingly characterise poor, fragile semidemocracies are argued to be essential sources of state stability by those critical of current democracy support initiatives [Khan 2005]. The degree to which current media and communication trends are creatively disruptive of such relationships (leading for example to less corrupt and more transparent elite behaviours) or are destructively disruptive (leading for example to enhanced and possibly orchestrated and manufactured state fragility and loss of legitimacy) would be a useful area of increased research attention.

Finally, the answer to the question posed in this paper, is yes. Media development interventions have ignored and continue to ignore theories of state development such as those propounded by North and colleagues, particularly in their engagement in fragile states. It is also likely that theories of state development are failing to fully take into account the implications of the complex and historically unprecedented drivers shaping the decentralised communicative power characteristic of the increasingly fractured communication environments of such states. Much may be learned by a more structured research conversation between these different perspectives.

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