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MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

Media freedom indices in the media development context: how the different information tools can be used

Imprint

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Media freedom indices in the media development context:
How the different information tools can be used

The existing media freedom indices provide useful and valuable information particularly for the following four areas within the media development context: selection of countries, problem analysis, strategy development, and monitoring and evaluation. Hence, they can – and should – be considered both for the planning process of projects as well as for their monitoring and evaluation. But what kind of information do media freedom indices actually supply? How can they be used in the field of media development – and how not? And what are the specific features of the individual measures that are most helpful in the media development context?

Each media development project should be based on a thorough, in-depth analysis of the situation in the country. This research should not only take into account the specific characteristics of the media system itself, but also the overall political, economic, and social environment in which it operates. In the current shift towards long-term projects in the field of media development, this knowledge has become increasingly important for the development of accurate strategies aimed at improving ownership and sustainability.

This paper introduces the existing media freedom indices, and for each measure points out two aspects that are essential for the work of media development practitioners:
– the main characteristics of the index
– the different information tools provided by the index.

Based on this, the article ends with a discussion about how the different information tools can best be used in the media development context. The five most well-known and widely used international media freedom indices are included in the analysis:
– Freedom of the Press Index by Freedom House
– World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders
– Media Sustainability Index by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX)
– African Media Barometer by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
– Media Development Indicators by UNESCO

Freedom of the Press Index by Freedom House

Main characteristics
The Freedom of the Press Index has been published by the U.S. watchdog organization Freedom House since 1980. The annual survey is the longest-running media freedom measure as well as the one with the widest scope: it analyzes the situation of free and independent media at the global level, covering 199 countries and territories. The assessment considers various ways in which pressure can be placed upon the flow of information and the ability of print, broadcast, and online media to operate freely and without fear of repercussions.

To measure the status of media freedom in each country, the Freedom of the Press Index uses 23 so-called methodology questions divided into three broad categories: the legal environment, the political environment, and the economic

environment (Freedom House, 2015a). One analyst, typically an academic, NGO-worker or journalist, scores all questions and writes a country report. The majority of analysts are based outside the country that they are rating, normally in the U.S. (Schneider, 2014). In order to determine the final country score, the ratings are reviewed individually, on a comparative basis in regional meetings as well as cross-regionally.

The possible country scores range between 0 and 100, with 0 standing for the highest possible level of media freedom, and 100 reflecting the worst possible situation. Depending on their result, countries are classified into the categories of "Free" (country score of 0–30), "Partly Free" (31–60) and "Not Free" (61–100).

Information provided by the Freedom of the Press Index
Freedom House provides a multitude of different information tools, which are relevant for varying purposes in the context of media development. The most prominent tools are the global ranking of the Freedom of the Press Index, and the world press freedom map, which is presented as an interactive map online (Freedom House, 2015b). It not only gives a clear visual overview of the situation of media freedom worldwide, but also provides graphics on the evolution of media freedom in each country in the last 20 years. The map further allows for direct comparisons between countries.

Apart from these main tools, specific information about the different world regions is provided: regional trends are described in the main Freedom of the Press Index report. Further, regional rankings help to compare the status of countries within one particular region. In a regional map, the percentage of the population per region living in a free media environment is depicted (Freedom House, 2015c).

For each country, Freedom House not only presents the overall country score, but also the category scores regarding the legal, political, and economic environment. The findings are discussed in more detail in short country reports. However, reports do not exist for all nations.

One particular strength of the Freedom of the Press Index is that it provides information that allows for the tracking of changes over the course of more than 30 years. In fact, Excel sheets display the overall country scores, category scores and status of almost all countries from 1980 until today. Moreover, Freedom House provides in numerous graphics more general

information about global media freedom, e.g., the percentage of free, partly free, and not free countries in all world regions as well as the biggest gains and declines of the previous year and within the last five years (Freedom House, 2015d). Finally, the organization also publishes a special report dealing with internet freedom, called Freedom on the Net (Freedom House, 2015e).

Overall, the Freedom of the Press Index is helpful for media development practitioners when they need a broad overview of the status of global media freedom or are interested in general comparisons of regions or countries. With the help of the data not only global trends, but also developments on the regional and country level since 1980 can be tracked. The assessment further allows for a brief overview of the situation in each single country. Detailed information about specific aspects in the national context, however, are not provided by this index.

Main information tools provided by Freedom House
– Global and regional rankings
– Global and regional maps
– Country reports
– Excel files: Country scores, category scores and status of all countries and regions from 1980 until today
– Graphics: Percentage of free, partly free and not free countries on global and regional levels; percentage of the population living in free, partly free and not free media environments; biggest gains and declines
– Additional report: Freedom on the Net

World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders

Main characteristics
The World Press Freedom Index has been published by the French NGO Reporters Without Borders since 2002. Today, the annual survey is a well-known global ranking covering 180 countries. According to the organization, the index "reflects the degree of freedom that journalists, news media and netizens (Internet citizens) enjoy in each country, and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom" (Reporters Without Borders, 2015a).

To assess the situation of media freedom in each country, a comprehensive questionnaire consisting of 87 questions is used. These can be classified into six broad categories: Pluralism; media independence; environment and self-censorship; legislative framework; transparency, and infrastructure (ibid.). The questionnaire, available in 20 languages, is filled out by the NGO's partner organizations, correspondents, journalists, researchers, jurists, and human rights defenders. All respondents live in the country they evaluate. The number of completed questionnaires differs amongst the countries: while it is particularly low for African countries, namely between one and five questionnaires, there are more respondents for European countries (e.g., around 50 questionnaires for France, and 20 for Germany) (Schneider, 2014). The overall country scores

of the World Press Freedom Index range from 0 to 100, with 0 being the best possible score and 100 being the worst.

Information provided by the World Press Freedom Index
Reporters Without Borders publishes its findings in different ways. The global ranking and the global media freedom map are the most well-known information tools. Both tools provide a good overview of the situation of media environments worldwide. The map is interactive and provides the score and the rank of each country, changes compared to the previous year, and its position since 2002 (Reporters Without Borders, 2015c). The main World Press Freedom Index report summarizes the global trends and points out the most striking developments, i.e., the "fallers" and "risers" of each year (Reporters Without Borders, 2015b).

In order to give an overview of the status quo in the different world regions, the NGO further provides regional rankings. Moreover, for a very limited number of countries Reporters Without Borders also publishes country reports, which, admittedly, are very sketchy. The constant monitoring of incidents, though, communicated via press releases, allows for a more detailed and up-to-date understanding. In its Press Freedom Barometer the organization tracks all cases of journalists, media assistants, netizens, and citizen journalists killed and imprisoned – both for the current year and for all years since 2002 (Reporters Without Borders, 2015d).

Like Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders also publishes an additional report about internet freedom called Enemies of the Internet (Reporters Without Borders, 2015e). Furthermore, the NGO has recently introduced its global indicator of worldwide media freedom, which is the sum of all country scores and thus "measures the overall level of violations of freedom of information" (Reporters Without Borders, 2015b).

Generally, the World Press Freedom Index is a suitable source of information when an overview of the situation of media freedom worldwide is needed, and when global or regional comparisons want to be made. The measure further provides data on the general situation in each country since 2002. Reporters Without Borders' index is especially helpful to gather information about the physical safety of journalists as well as about particular incidents of media freedom violations in all countries around the world.

Main information tools provided by Reporters Without Borders
– Global and regional rankings
– Global map
– Global indicator of media freedom
– Limited number of short country reports
– Press Freedom Barometer: Number of media workers killed and imprisoned
– Press releases: Constant monitoring of media freedom violations worldwide
– Additional report: Enemies of the Internet

Media Sustainability Index by the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX)

Main characteristics

The first edition of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) for Europe and Eurasia was published by the U.S. NGO International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) in 2001. In 2005, IREX added a study for the Middle East and North Africa, in 2007 launched its Africa MSI, and in 2008 its Asia MSI (IREX 2015a). Until today, IREX has assessed the situation of media freedom in 80 countries in separate regional reports. The focus of the index clearly lies on Europe and Eurasia: whilst an MSI for this region is carried out annually, evaluations of the other regions are published only irregularly. The MSI's aim is to "provide a complete picture of the development of sustainable, independent media" (IREX, 2015b).

In order to evaluate media sustainability in a country the MSI assesses 40 indicators, divided into five so-called objectives: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions (IREX, 2015c). A panel of around 14 local experts drawn from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, and academic institutions discusses and scores all indicators. The written analysis of the discussion forms the basis of each detailed country chapter; the sum of the country chapters constitutes the overall regional report.

The possible country scores range between 0 and 4, with 0–1 meaning "Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press", 1–2 standing for an "Unsustainable Mixed System", 2–3 meaning "Near Sustainability", and 3–4 "Sustainable" (ibid.).

Information provided by the Media Sustainability Index

IREX does not provide different tools, but publishes all its information within the regional MSI reports, which are divided into the specific country chapters. The NGO presents regional classifications using the four aforementioned categories rather than rankings. For an overview of the region, the countries are arranged within the four categories depending on their performances. The overall average score and all objective scores of each country are presented in regional graphics. Positive and negative changes compared to the previous year are indicated. Further, to track developments over time, the changes of the country scores since 2001 are presented (IREX, 2015c).

The country chapters are subdivided into the five objectives and are typically around 15 pages long. Hence, in contrast to the global rankings, detailed information is provided in text form. While not all individual indicators are addressed in each country chapter, the most important aspects are. At the beginning of each chapter, general and media-specific information about the country is given. The individual objective scores of the previous five years are presented in country graphics in order to depict changes (IREX, 2015d). Overall, people active in the media development field should use the Media Sustainability Index when they are interested in the situation of media

freedom in one specific region and its countries. The MSI is particularly helpful for information about Europe and Eurasia, as it focuses on this region. The material provided by IREX allows for a general overview of the different regions as well as more detailed insights regarding the individual categories (called objectives). The index is further suitable when detailed information about the situation in one country covered by the MSI is needed. Developments over time can also be tracked with the help of the MSI data.

Main information tools provided by IREX
– Regional classifications (and last year's changes)
– Classifications of objectives for each country (last five years)
– Detailed country chapters (divided into objectives)
– General and media-specific information for each country

African Media Barometer by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Main characteristics

The African Media Barometer (AMB) was developed by fesmedia Africa (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung) and the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) in 2004. Since then it has been conducted in 30 African countries, in some of them for the fifth time already (fesmedia, 2015a). As an "in-depth and comprehensive description system for national media environments on the African continent, based on home-grown criteria derived from African Protocols and Declarations" (fesmedia, 2015b) it is conducted in each country every two to three years. Recently, the AMB methodology and concept have been transferred to other regions and are now being used in Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe as well.

To analyze the situation in each country, the AMB uses 39 indicators divided into four sectors: protection and promotion of freedom of expression and freedom of the media; diversity, independence, and sustainability of the media landscape; transparency and independence of broadcasting regulation; and media's professional standards (fesmedia, 2015c). A panel of 10 to 12 local experts, consisting of media practitioners and representatives from civil society discusses and scores the indicators. The possible scores range between 1 ("country does not meet indicator") and 5 ("country meets all aspects of the indicator").

Information tools provided by the African Media Barometer

The findings of the AMB are published in very extensive country reports that summarize the overall situation and provide detailed information about all 39 indicators in text form. The reports are typically between 80 and 100 pages long and divided into the different sectors, which, in turn, are subdivided into the individual indicators (for an example see fesmedia, 2015d).

Although the reports are generally of a qualitative nature, the AMB results are also presented as scores: for each indicator, the rating of all panelists as well as an average score is reported. Additionally, the average indicator scores of all previous AMB

assessments are provided in order to track changes. In a next step, these average indicator scores are added up to form average sector scores, which form the overall country scores. However, the latter are no longer published in the reports.

Moreover, AMB assessments also summarize the positive and negative developments since the last analysis, and give specific recommendations of activities needed over the next years (ibid).

Overall, AMB assessments are important sources in the context of media development when detailed information about an African country – or a nation in a different region that has been covered by a Media Barometer – is needed. Not only the country's performance regarding the different categories is disclosed, but detailed information about each single indicator is provided. This allows for an in-depth analysis of one country as well as a thorough comparison between any two AMB countries.

Main information tools provided by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
– Detailed country reports (all indicators in text form) for 30 African and a few Asian and Eastern European countries
– Indicator and sector scores for each country
– Summary of positive and negative developments
– Recommendations

Media Development Indicators by UNESCO

Main characteristics
The Media Development Indicators (MDIs) are a diagnostic tool offering an inclusive list of indicators aimed at enabling in-depth assessments of national media landscapes (UNESCO, 2015a). Developed in 2008, MDI assessments have been carried out in 25 countries, while 10 are ongoing (as of September 2016) (UNESCO, 2015b). Amongst the goals of the MDIs is identifying weaknesses of local media systems and providing recommendations for overcoming them, rather than longitudinal analyses or comparisons. The assessments are not carried out on a regular basis, although the aim is to provide follow up assessments after approximately three years (Schneider, 2014).

The MDI-framework identifies five principal media development categories, which can be summarized as follows: regulatory system; plurality and diversity of media, economic playing field, and transparency of ownership; media as a platform for democratic discourse; professional capacity building and supporting institutions; and infrastructural capacity. They are divided into 21 sub-categories, 50 key indicators and 190 sub-indicators (UNESCO, 2015c).[1]

Typically, a research team of local and international researchers conducts multi-stakeholder consultations involving both private and public actors in order to evaluate all key indicators. On this basis, the researchers write a detailed MDI assessment report. The indicators are qualitative and not quantified.

Information tools provided by the Media Development Indicators
The findings of UNESCO's Media Development Indicators are presented in comprehensive country reports (of around 100 pages in length) structured among the different categories and indicators. Hence, detailed information about each indicator is provided in text form. Since the indicators are not quantified and the assessments are not conducted regularly, the information provided by the MDIs allows for an in-depth analysis of the state of media freedom in one country but not for any kind of comparison.

Apart from the MDIs, the organization provides another set of indicators dealing with journalists' working conditions: the Journalists' Safety Indicators (UNESCO, 2015d). Moreover, in 2015, UNESCO in cooperation with DW Akademie developed an additional set of indicators, the Media Viability Indicators, focusing on the financial sustainability of media outlets, which is currently in the test phase.

Consequently, the MDIs are an important source when very detailed information is needed about the situation of media freedom or media development respectively in one country for which an MDI report exists.

Main information tools provided by UNESCO
– Very detailed country reports (25 countries)
– Recommendations
– Journalists' Safety Indicators
– Media Viability Indicators (test phase)

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[1] In 2015, UNESCO and DW Akademie developed an additional sixth category dealing with the viability of media. The draft indicators are currently undergoing an international consultation process for comments and feedback (UNESCO, 2015e).

How to use the different information tools in the media development context

The media freedom indices introduced above are relevant for four areas in particular within the media development context:
1. Selection of countries,
2. Problem analysis,
3. Strategy development, and
4. Monitoring and evaluation

But which of the presented information tools can be used for which objective? And how should the measures not be used?

The Media Freedom Navigator

An important starting point for all purposes is the Media Freedom Navigator developed by DW Akademie, which summarizes the results of all existing international media freedom measures (DW Akademie, 2015). The responsive website informs media development actors about which index has been applied to which country, i.e. which information tools are available for certain countries if at all. The Media Freedom Navigator not only provides the overall classification of all measures conducted in each country, but also the specific ranks and scores. Moreover, important details about the methodology of each index as well as links to additional sources are given.

1. Selection of countries

In order to determine in which country a media development intervention should be implemented a multitude of information is needed. For a global overview of the situation of media freedom as well as a general comparison of all countries, the two worldwide rankings are the most suitable sources of information: the Freedom of the Press Index by Freedom House and the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders. As the oldest regularly published media freedom measure Freedom House's index provides the longest chronological chain of historical media freedom data. Consequently, it allows not only for comparisons across countries but also across time: its data enables a juxtaposition of the current situation in different countries as well as the tracking and analysis of global trends over the last 30+ years. The two rankings not only allow for a global overview but also supply a wide range of information about individual countries. If the other international media freedom indices include reports on the country in question, they should also be taken into account. The much more detailed information is very helpful for an appropriate selection of countries.

It is very important to bear in mind, that changes of ranks of one country do not necessarily reveal anything about actual improvements or declines in the national media environment. Depending on other countries' performances, it might be that a nation drops in the ranking, although its media freedom has actually remained the same, or even slightly improved.

And vice versa, it can happen that a country improves in the ranking, while its score has actually decreased. Therefore, in the context of media development the scores should always be looked at, rather than the ranks. Moreover, the classifications of the different measures are quite broad and do not indicate minor changes. Consequently, they should only be considered for a general overview, and not more.

If one country from a specific region has to be selected, a regional overview can best be gained through the information tools provided by Freedom House's Freedom of the Press Index and IREX's Media Sustainability Index. However, the latter may be a stronger tool as it not only gives an overview, but also provides detailed information about several regions.

Overall, in order to capture the broader picture in one country or region (not only the media environment but also the political and social circumstances), other sources of information should be consulted. Further, the global rankings and their media freedom maps, for example, enable a useful orientation by showing classifications, but do not provide details regarding specific aspects. Therefore, in order to be able to thoroughly select countries gathering information through one's own field visits, interviews, and consultations is essential.

2. Problem analysis

Once the country is selected, it is important to analyze the media landscape thoroughly. First of all, in order to assess the conditions of the national media environment within the global and regional context, the aforementioned measures should be used to get an overview. Further, the global rankings inform the public about the broad characteristics of the country – its overall classification, its category scores, and its general development over time. Regional details are provided by IREX's Media Sustainability Index (MSI) and the African Media Barometer.

In order to get detailed information about one country, these two measures as well as UNESCO's Media Development Indicators (MDIs) should be consulted. All three supply in-depth information about the specific aspects regarding media freedom. While the MSI informs about details at the category level and does not address each specific indicator, the Media Barometers and the MDI assessments do.

However, detailed information is neither available for all countries nor for all years. As mentioned, the MSI has a strong focus on Europe and Eurasia, but has been applied to 80 countries worldwide. With the help of the African Media Barometer assessments have been carried out in 30 African countries plus a few eastern European and Asian countries. UNESCO's MDIs have only been applied once to 25 countries, though 10 analyses are ongoing. In addition to the information provided by the indices, for an adequate problem analysis it is vital to collect one's own data through literature review, interviews, and field visits. After collecting this individual information it may be useful to re-read the indices' reports with deeper insight.

3. Strategy development

Strategy development of media assistance projects requires very detailed information and therefore the three aforementioned media freedom indices are the most suitable sources. However, the strategy development should be based on a sound, in-depth analysis of the specific structures of the respective media environment. This includes identifying potential partners and other actors as well as relevant dynamics. The three indices – if available for the specific country – do provide information about certain detailed aspects (depending on their indicators), but they cannot properly display dynamics or the role of specific actors. Therefore, while they are very useful as a knowledge base, for strategy development it is essential to gather further data through field visits, interviews, and other sources of information.

4. Monitoring and evaluation

In order to monitor and evaluate the success and impact of media assistance programs, proper baseline studies have to be conducted and direct changes and developments regarding specific characteristics tracked. While in rare cases the existing media freedom indices can provide helpful data for monitoring and evaluation[2], the available information is typically insufficient and does not have the exact scope needed.

For instance, a project could have a positive impact but might be undertaken in an overall environment of deteriorating media freedom. Or, an intervention related to investigative journalism could be considered successful, but could simultaneously lead to a decline in a country's score if the journalists' efforts met with reprisals such as increased physical harassment or libel lawsuits.

Generally, the information provided by the media freedom indices is too broad to actually monitor a media development project or evaluate specific activities. Therefore, individually tailored methods have to be applied. However, the indicators and sub-indicators of the different indices can provide critical orientation for the development of one's own project-specific indicators.

Conclusion

The existing international media freedom indices provide a variety of different information tools that contain important knowledge for media development practitioners. As shown, the different tools are of varying significance for the relevant purposes within the media development context: while some measures mainly supply general data that provide a broad overview, others publish less information tools but more detailed information about specific aspects. Whether the media freedom indices can be used at all, obviously depends on whether they cover the country in question.

In summary, the presented media freedom assessments should never be used as the only source of information. Rather, their data should generally be verified and validated against other knowledge sources. This is especially true because of the shortcomings of the indices' methodologies. Especially the two global rankings were developed by a few people mostly from Western countries, and their indicators are evaluated by very few people. In turn, the results of such a small group can be subjective and potentially biased. Hence, media development practitioners should be informed about how the assessments are compiled in order to be able to critically reflect their findings.

Consequently, the international media freedom indices should be used in the context of media development, but they should be used with caution.

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[2] In the Reporters Without Borders index, for example, Mongolia was ranked considerably higher after the establishment of the country's first media council, which was supported by DW Akademie. These details could be included in the evaluation as part of a contribution analysis or as an unexpected outcome.

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