

SPOTLIGHT 12

The media

Under the presidency of Alberto Fujimori (1990–2000) in Peru, the bribing of politicians, judges, and news media companies was a well-established practice to weaken accountability and co-opt the opposition. The architect of the system, Fujimori’s security chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, kept a detailed record—both on paper and on video—of all payments made. However, Montesinos failed to secure the support of one TV channel (Channel N), which continued to publicize independent analysis and investigations of the regime’s performance (McMillan and Zoido 2004).¹ This channel then made public the first “Vladivideos” in 2000, thereby revealing the magnitude of the corruption and the rent-seeking behavior of elites. The popular outrage generated by disclosure of the videos helped opposition forces mobilize, leading to the disintegration of the regime and the ousting of Fujimori a few months later.

This case highlights the central role that the media can play as an agent of accountability. By publicizing information that is reliable and salient for citizens, the media can change the incentives of elites by increasing the costs of certain behavior or policy decisions, reshape preferences and beliefs, and make the policy arena more contestable (Khemani and others 2016). But precisely because of their role, the media can be captured by powerful interests and undermine—rather than support—possible entry points for change.

Changing incentives: The watchdog role of media

The media can play a role as “public sentinels” (Norris 2010), generating and publicizing information about

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government performance, shaping the incentives of politicians to deliver, and making governments more responsive to voters, thereby improving the quality of public policies. By making information public, media companies can strengthen the bargaining power of citizens, increasing the costs for public officials to engage in rent-seeking behavior (see chapter 8). Indeed, the media can facilitate the efforts of civic associations to mobilize citizens around an anticorruption agenda and help citizens monitor the quality of government services, acting as important agents of “social accountability” (Peruzzotti and Smulovitz 2006). In Uganda, for example, elite capture undermined public service provision, with local schools receiving on average only 24 percent of the central government grants to which they were entitled. After a media campaign publicized the amount the schools were supposed to receive, the average funding increased to 80 percent, improving school enrollment and learning outcomes. The effects were larger in schools that were closer to a newspaper outlet (Reinikka and Svensson 2005).

Access to media makes government more responsive to citizens’ needs. For example, a comparison of Indian states from 1958 to 1992 found that government spending was more responsive to local needs in areas in which newspaper circulation was higher (Besley and Burgess 2002). However, this type of relationship can also generate biases against citizens who do not have access to media, especially the poor living in rural areas (Strömberg 2015). For information to reach the intended audiences (the publicity condition described in spotlight 11), the media need to make information accessible to all. According to data from the Gallup World Poll, the media sources that citizens rely on vary dramatically across regions, although television

and radio are consistently more popular than newspapers. Moreover, the means by which citizens can access media are also starkly different; despite huge gains in internet penetration rates in recent decades, cell phone ownership far outstrips rates of access to computers or internet at home (Khemani and others 2016; World Bank 2016).

Reshaping preferences: The agenda-setting role of the media

As discussed in the *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (World Bank 2015), the media can play an important role in reshaping preferences and social norms within societies.² Media “both entertain and educate, in order to increase audience members’ knowledge about an educational issue, create favorable attitudes, shift social norms, and change overt behavior” (Singhal and Rogers 2004, 5). A growing body of studies based on randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental design provides empirical support for this claim, pointing at the transformative potential of “educational entertainment” (or “edutainment”). For example, in Brazil, watching a soap opera that shows female characters who have few or no children has been associated with significant drops in fertility rates, changing preferences for family size (La Ferrara, Chong, and Duryea 2012). In India, access to television has improved gender norms, altered son preference, and decreased fertility (Jensen and Oster 2009). In Tanzania, exposure to a particular radio program was associated with a significant increase in condom use and reduction in the number of sexual partners (Vaughan and others 2000). In Rwanda, exposure to radio programs changed citizens’ attitudes toward authorities, promoting more pro-social behavior and more active participation in conflict resolution (Paluck and Green 2009). Ultimately, the role of the media, ranging from local radio stations to international broadcasting networks, in reaching broad audiences and reshaping the demands of what they expect from both their government and their media is essential for ensuring the sustainability of progress in promoting more contestable and participatory spaces of policy dialogue.

Changing contestability: The political economy of media capture and competition

Control of the media is one instrument through which elites bargain. They can capture the media to

shape coverage and content, reducing contestability. Although it is difficult to quantify the relative importance of controlling the media compared with other institutions aimed at ensuring checks and balances, in Peru it was estimated that bribing the media was in fact 10 times more expensive than bribing legislators and judges during the Fujimori regime. The television channel with the largest viewership received US\$1.5 million a month (McMillan and Zoido 2004). Another strategy governments can use is to adopt regulations that favor a specific media outlet or buy advertising space in exchange for political support. For example, in Argentina the amount of coverage of corruption scandals significantly declined for newspapers that received government-related advertising from 1998 to 2007 (Di Tella and Franceschelli 2011). Private interests can also capture media markets: as of 2016 about 6 percent of all the world’s billionaires were involved in some media business, reaching peaks of more than 20 percent in countries such as Mexico, Poland, and República Bolivariana de Venezuela.³ Other research shows that media capture by narrow interest groups is more likely when media ownership is more concentrated and income inequalities are higher (Corneo 2006; Petrova 2008).

These findings suggest that more competition and entry in the media market are fundamental to increasing contestability in the policy-making arena (Khemani and others 2016). Ensuring the media’s independence from government ownership works toward the same effect. However, ownership of the media and press freedom are also the by-products of elite bargains and power relations, creating an equilibrium that is difficult to change. One important factor driving the growth of independent media is the advertising market. A study of U.S. newspapers in the 19th century revealed that independent media are more likely to emerge in places with higher advertising revenues (Petrova 2011). When advertising revenues increase, media outlets have alternative revenue sources and therefore are less willing to distort news coverage to protect the interests of subsidizing groups, especially if such distortion undermines their ability to secure advertising revenues.

The international donor community can also provide an alternative revenue stream to media as a means of fostering more independent markets and reducing dependency on government funding. For example, aid flows to support the independence of the media in Tanzania led to important gains in media freedom and the growth of newspapers and television stations (Tripp 2012). However, international funding of the media tends to be limited. In 2014 only

0.3 percent of total official development assistance was allocated to media support.⁴ That said, monetary support of the media is often insufficient to overcome the existing political challenges, and it may in fact lead to unintended consequences.

In some cases, elite bargains can open up opportunities for more competitive media markets and lead to unexpected changes in contestability. In Malaysia, for example, ruling elites invested in internet infrastructure as a way to attract foreign investment. This led to a “democratizing” effect in the media market, with independent bloggers publicizing news on government performance. This development has had an important effect on voting behavior: in districts with higher internet access, the loss of political support for the ruling party has been more pronounced (Miner 2015). Similar effects have been found in the Russian Federation, where the access to a privately owned and independent television channel (NTS) was associated with a higher propensity to vote for the opposition (Enikolopov, Petrova, and Zhuravskaya 2011).

Media content is often decided by elites. The effect of media bias as an instrument to reduce contestability, reinforce prior beliefs, and increase polarization among social groups is well documented in the literature (Strömberg 2015, 2016). Elites can also use the media as a coordinating device for propaganda purposes and—in extreme cases—for repression. For example, 10 percent of the reported killings during the genocide in Rwanda have been attributed to radio broadcasting, which facilitated militia targeting of the Tutsi population (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

Under certain circumstances, new social media can counteract elite control of the media market. The anti-G-20 movements following the global financial crisis in 2008–09 (Bennett and Segerberg 2012), the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, the Arab Spring that began to spread in early 2011, and the massive protests that erupted in Brazil surrounding the 2014 World Cup (Lemieux 2015)—all demonstrate the instrumental role played by the internet and new social media in facilitating citizens’ collective action. The same events, however, also highlight the limitations of social media. Social media can be effective in generating sudden spikes of protests and in coordinating uprising, but they alone cannot yield sustained representation of interests and promote social change (Ackland and Tanaka 2015). According to the *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends* (World Bank 2016), “analog” complements are needed to maximize the potential of social media as drivers of change. Political and social organizations can act as such complements (see chapter 8).

Notes

1. It is unclear whether Montesinos failed to secure the support of Channel N because the owners of the channel rejected the bribe or because Montesinos made a strategic mistake by undervaluing the importance of a cable channel with only a few thousand subscribers (McMillan and Zoido 2004).
2. This section largely relies and builds on the *World Development Report 2015: Mind, Society, and Behavior* (World Bank 2015). A background paper for that Report, “The Impact of Entertainment Education,” provides a recent review of the literature, analysis of selected cases, and evidence on results.
3. WDR 2017 team, based on *Forbes*, “The World’s Billionaires,” <http://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>.
4. WDR 2017 team estimates, based on data supplied by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

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