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Evaluating the Impacts of Media Assistance: Problems and Principles

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Abstract: While some form of evaluation has always been a requirement of development projects, in the media assistance field this has predominantly been limited to very basic modes of counting outputs, such as the number of journalists trained or the number of articles produced on a topic. Few media assistance evaluations manage to provide sound evidence of impacts on governance and social change. So far, most responses to the problem of media assistance impact evaluation collate evaluation methodologies and methods into toolkits. This paper suggests that the problem of impact evaluation of media assistance is understood to be more than a simple issue of methods, and outlines three underlying tensions and challenges that stifle implementation of effective practices in media assistance evaluation. First, there are serious conceptual ambiguities that affect evaluation design. Second, bureaucratic systems and imperatives often drive evaluation practices, which reduces their utility and richness. Third, the search for the ultimate method or toolkit of methods for media assistance evaluation tends to overlook the complex epistemological and political undercurrents in the evaluation discipline, which can lead to methods being used without consideration of the ontological implications. Only if these contextual factors are known and understood can effective evaluations be designed that meets all stakeholders' needs.

Keywords: Cambodia, communication for development, evaluation, governance, media assistance, media development, monitoring and evaluation

Introduction

Media assistance includes efforts aimed at supporting and developing local media capacities. Common strategies in media assistance include: building the capacity of journalists and other media professionals, strengthening professional associations or educational institutions, advocating for policy and legislation reforms, promoting citizen voice through the media, and providing infrastructure or equipment supports. The "new wave" of democratization with the fall of the Soviet Union, and the opening up of countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America (Carothers 1999), triggered an interest in media assistance, and a rapid mobilization of donor funds towards its use (Kumar 2006: 653-654). Many of the largest and enduring media assistance organizations were established during this

period (including Internews, BBC Media Action, Article 19, IREX and Panos).
During the same period, attention to evaluation[1] of international development assistance rose dramatically, and there have been significant shifts in the complexity and expectations of evaluation of development interventions since the 1990s and early 2000s (Conlin & Stirrat 2008). Evaluations in the contemporary context need to contend with much broader sites of impact and many more actors, which complicates attribution, and, given the ideal of local ownership of development, has significantly more complicated audiences and purposes to serve (ibid).

Interest in evaluation of media assistance lagged behind other development sectors. Practitioners and organizations involved in early media assistance, dubbed the "media missionaries" (Mosher 2011: 239-240; Sparks 2005: 42), so believed in the importance of press freedom and its contribution to democratization that there was a disinclination to critically examine media assistance efforts, and little attention was given to rigorous monitoring and evaluation (Mosher 2011: 239-240). Despite the slow start, in the past decade media assistance organizations and practitioners have increasingly found themselves with heightened expectations to prove effectiveness and impacts. A series of recent international conferences, funded research projects, and publications on the topic attests to the growing interest in responding to this problem. Evaluating media assistance has proved particularly challenging however, given the reliance on abstract notions of 'press freedom' (LaMay 2011; Waisbord 2011), and the complex and intangible nature of social change, which is often unpredictable and inseparable from other political, cultural, social and technological changes (Lennie & Tacchi 2013).

The critical analysis of media assistance evaluation in this paper uncovers the ways that donor interests and bureaucratic systems and shape evaluation practices. It also points to how the continuities in the positioning of media assistance goals and objectives influences evaluation design. The findings presented here support Waisbord's (2011) observations that the challenges of media assistance evaluation are more than methodological: there are also pressing conceptual and bureaucratic impediments. I extend Waisbord's work, providing an analysis into the contexts, perspectives and practices of evaluation actors.

Principles, toolkits and guides

Sida is one of the few donors to have developed a specific list of suggested indicators for media assistance (see Puddephatt 2010: 22-27), and USAID often encourages the use of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) developed by IREX, or the Freedom House indices (Abbott & Taylor 2011: 260). Aside from this, however,

[1] In common with Lennie and Tacchi (2013), in this paper I use the term 'evaluation' to include all research, data collection and assessment activities that contribute to understanding the changes occurring in relation to the project, and possible ways to improve.

media assistance evaluation practices are usually guided by evaluation policies general to the donor organization. These general policies are often ill-suited to the particular challenges of media assistance evaluation. There have, however, been several academic and industry responses to the problem of media assistance evaluation, with some useful contributions among them. Conferences and symposia have led to principles, toolkits, and online collaborative spaces.

An international and multi-agency group of practitioners and scholars met in 2010 to explore evaluation of media assistance in conflict contexts, which led to the development of a set of shared guiding principles called the *Caux Principles* (Arsenault, Himelfarb, & Abbott 2011: 24-28). These include: 1) increasing financial support for monitoring and evaluation; 2) maintaining flexibility in evaluation plans in order to adapt to changing conditions; 3) developing project specific indicators; 4) collaborating with local researchers in evaluation; 5) sharing insights and fostering learning across the sector; 6) evaluating continuously through the project and beyond; 7) maintaining realistic expectations of what evaluation can deliver, and what a project can realistically achieve; and 8) increasing clarity and work towards standardization of evaluation language among donors.

Internews produced a series of research papers on the topic as part of the *Media-Map Project*. The project included investigations into the issues and challenges of evaluation, donor uses of evaluation, selected case studies attempting to illuminate nation-level, long-term impacts of media assistance, and some experiments with evaluation approaches.

There have been several efforts to develop M&E (Monitoring & Evaluation) toolkits specifically for media assistance, including those by the Catholic Media Council (CAMECO), the Global Forum for Media Development, Internews, DFID, DANIDA and the World Bank. CAMECO organized two symposia on measuring change in media assistance evaluation. At the 2009 event, the mediaME wiki[2] was launched, which was intended as an open space for practitioners to share their resources and expertise on methods and approaches (CAMECO 2009). While the idea was promising, there remain many gaps and empty pages in the wiki.

The Global Forum for Media Development's (GFMD) toolkit (Banda, Berger, Panneerselvan, Nair, & Whitehouse 2009) focuses on comparing the available international indicators relevant to media assistance for the purpose of a needs assessment. This has been superseded by the 2008 UNESCO Media Development Indicators. The GMFD toolkit concludes with some generalist advice on the role of qualitative and quantitative measures, and analysis methodologies such as triangulation.

[2] http://mediame-wiki.net/wiki/index.php/Main_Page.

Internews has commissioned works on different monitoring and evaluation methods for media assistance to create a toolkit, which includes social network analysis, content analysis, focus groups, surveys, Delphi method, in-depth interviews and key informant interviews, with some additional resources in progress for digital media metrics, participatory monitoring and evaluation, and Outcome Mapping (Abbott 2013 pers. comm. 26 July). Susan Abbott, Senior Program Development Adviser at Internews, explained that they have been "Internewsifying" the kits to "make them useful and sensible" for Internews staff (ibid). These kits were not publicly available at the time of writing.

DFID commissioned a set of guidelines for Information and Communication for Development, which included advice on monitoring and evaluation planning, and on approaches and methods together with information on the challenges associated with each (Myers, Woods, & Odugbemi 2005). Similarly, DANIDA (2007) has also developed guides for monitoring and evaluation of its projects in this field. DANIDA's guidelines are less specific in terms of methods, and instead focus much more on explaining the policies and objectives of Danish aid in this field, and on providing some suggested indicators. The guidelines give an overview of evaluation methodologies and methods, suggesting an overall participatory approach.

Finally, the CommGAP initiative of the World Bank produced a framework for media assistance evaluation (CommGAP 2007). The framework offers example indicators against four broad media assistance objectives. In each case, the impact for each objective is noted as needing to be "argued, not measured" (CommGAP 2007: 9, 11, 12, 14).

While most of these conferences and publications view inadequate media assistance evaluation as simply a problem of evaluation methodology in my research I found – like Waisbord (2011) – that many more factors are at play. The three challenges identified are discussed following a brief overview of the methodology used in this study.

Research design and methodology

The findings in this paper are drawn from a research project that used a multi-phased, qualitative research methodology. I began with a document analysis of 47 evaluation reports sourced from the CAMECO resource library (30), the Communication Initiative (13), and manual searches (4). This was followed by semi-structured interviews with 10 evaluators. At the time of the interview seven were consultants, three were employees of media assistance organizations. Three of the 10 evaluators had previous experience in both internal and external roles. Third, I undertook a case study of a media assistance project, the Cambodian Communication Assistance Project (CCAP), funded by the Australian Agency for

International Development (AusAID) within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and managed by ABC International Development (ABC ID). This involved document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders and observers (48) and other media and Communication for Development (C4D) actors in Cambodia (5). An iterative process of coding, categorization and analysis was used to undertake the qualitative data analysis progressively. The data was analysed according to thematic analysis approaches (Bryman 2008: 550-554; Flick 1998: 187-192, 2009: 318-323).

There are several limitations associated with the methodology. Most importantly, the analysed documents were limited to published evaluations included in the databases, and the case study was undertaken during the first year of implementation.

The problem of conceptual ambiguity

The first challenge to media assistance evaluation relates to the difficulty in articulating the model of changes underpinning a project. The highly politically charged era that gave birth to contemporary media assistance has had lasting influences on the models of change used by media assistance organizations. Despite the adaption of media assistance towards broader development goals, including the strong association with good governance, expectations of media assistance impact remain bound to ambiguously described press freedom and media democratization goals. Jones and Waisbord (2010) found that the application of universalist models and conceptually vague terms in international media assistance (as expressed in mission statements and program goals), as if these have singular and settled meanings across regions and contexts, has led to disconnections between the rationale for programs, goals, and activities. They argue that ultimately these "conceptual blindspots" have debilitated long-term impact assessment and measurement. Their research found "indicators" in media assistance projects tend to be measured in terms of quantified outputs, such as the number of journalists trained, rather than any real attempt to address the stated goals (2010: 20-21), an observation echoed by others (e.g. LaMay 2011: 229; Taylor 2010: 2). Jones and Waisbord find that this situation partly results from bureaucratic incentives that demand immediate and quantified results, but it also reflects an absence of analytical and sophisticated models of media change, which take into account local contexts (2010; also Waisbord 2011).

In light of these challenges, Manyozo's (2012) recent distillation of media, communication and development theories into three basic approaches provides a relevant framework for rethinking media assistance impacts. Like several other overviews of the field, Manyozo points to the influences of different paradigms, such as modernization, post-colonial and participatory theories of development.

His overview, however, is principally based on the identification of three core theoretical approaches to media communication and development, summarized in Table 1. Combining these defining attributes – the media, communication and development approach and the development paradigm – offers a two-dimensional rubric through which to view differences in approaches, and provides a useful scaffolding for unpacking theoretical diversity.

Table 1: Three approaches to media, communication and development. Adapted from Manyozo (2012)

Media for Development	Media Development	Community Engagement
Focus on content	Focus on industry	Focus on dialogue
Aims to educate and inform	Aims to improve governance	Aims to foster participatory decision making and self-determination

Manyozo's first approach is "media for development" (2012: 54-111), which focused on the use of media content for the transmission of information about development themes. This category includes the strategic use of communication to influence particular individual behaviour (behaviour change communication) or social norms, and edutainment strategies. The second approach outlined by Manyozo (2012: 112-151) is "media development". This approach focused on the capacities of the media system with attention to professional practice, infrastructures, media organizations and policies. The third is "community engagement" (also referred to as "participatory communication") (Manyozo 2012: 152-195). This approach focused on grassroots participation and two-way communication towards participatory decision making.

I found this a highly suitable framework for analysing my case study project, CCAP, which aimed to introduce talkback radio formats to government-owned provincial radio stations in Cambodia. The CCAP project design document described objectives that approximated each of the three approaches (see Table 2). In interviews, project stakeholders also described all three approaches, particularly emphasising the role of CCAP's talkback radio programs as a "bridge" to connect citizens and authorities.

Table 2: CCAP objectives with implied approaches

CCAP Objectives	**Objective 1: To enhance the capacity of selected local media outlets to deliver balanced and credible information on transparency and accountability issues.**	**Objective 2: To strengthen the voice of citizens and the transparency and accountability of authorities through meaningful flows of information.**	**Objective 3: To begin to professionalise media systems by strengthening links between emerging broadcasters, media research and PDI.**
Primary approach	a) Focus on industry ('Media Development'). b) Focus on content ('Media for Development').	Focus on communication and dialogue processes ('Community Engagement').	Emphasis on industry ('Media Development').

Applying this structure to an analysis of CCAP's evaluation activities illuminated the interplay of theories, but also the confusion and complexity that can occur when seeking to create indicators and assign methods without theoretical clarity. Not all indicators provided in the Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF) corresponded with models of change implied in the objectives. Overall, the indicators in the MEF skewed towards an underlying emphasis on changes in the quality and reception of content. This skew was exacerbated when the indicators were translated into evaluation activities and questions. As shown in Table 3, the evaluation activities were dominated by exploration of content reception, such as the number of listeners and changes in listeners' understanding of the topics (mainly 'governance').

Table 3: CCAP evaluation activities by the implied media, communication and development approach

	Media for Development (focus on content)	**Media Development (focus on industry)**	**Community Engagement (focus on dialogue processes)**
Evaluation activities	Audience listenership statistics Focus group research (audiences) Baseline study of comprehension of governance Content analysis of governance	Baseline study of staff capacity	Database of on-air promises and actions by authorities in response to citizen demands, leading to case examples of positive outcomes.

The escalating of the focus in the evaluation activities on audience reception and understanding of content can be traced back to the development of the baseline research. It was from the baseline itself that the aim to impact 'governance' came to be primarily framed through content-based models of change, with a secondary concern on the capacity of staff. Although a stated aim of the baseline report is, "to determine audience perceptions about [Provincial Department of Information radio] content and issues concerning voice, transparency and accountability" (Taylor Nelson Sofres (TNS) Cambodia 2012: 6), the baseline report itself was dominated by measures of the level of comprehension among the radio staff and citizens of specific terms relating to governance (such as accountability and transparency).

There were indications about how and why this shift occurred in the interviews with the commissioned consultants. One consultant described the negotiations involved in moving from an indicator to an evaluation method thus:

> "So there were indicators, but they weren't easy to translate into a SMART indicator.[3] The indicator was to 'increase good governance', so we had to change it to 'the audiences' understanding of good governance', and 'audiences' understanding of transparency."[4] (Consultant 1 2013 pers. comm. 24 May)

Here then, the root of the problem lay in a difficulty in operationalising the key term, 'governance', and translating the indicators provided into methods and evaluation questions. In response, the CCAP consultants together with the monitoring and evaluation teams from ABC ID and CCAP decided to change the question to one which seeks to gauge the level of conceptual knowledge among PDI staff and the local community to match the methods being used.

For a project like CCAP, where the aim is to introduce talkback or other discussion program formats, I propose that increased attention to the processes of two-way communication (between citizens and authorities), understood in terms of Manyozo's community engagement approach, would significantly enhance the design of evaluations[5]. In this way, dialogue and participation would be understood as contributing to good governance processes.

Pivoting the primary model of change in this way has several implications that are important to consider. First, it suggests very different types of indicators and evaluation questions, such as attention to changes in both the governed and the governors. Second, it redefines impacts in terms of changes in social processes, including changes in power distributions, voice, dialogue and relationships, which each contribute to the good governance processes such as accountability and transparency. This emphasis on the communication process itself is a significant

[3] Some variations for the acronym SMART Indicators include: "Specific, Measurable, Attainable and action orientated, Relevant, Time-Bound" (Lennie & Tacchi 2013), "Specific, Measurable, Attributable, Realistic, Targeted" (Gertler, Martinez, Premand, Rawlings & Vermeersch 2011: 27), "Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound" (Souter 2008: 168).

[4] This quote required significant editing for clarity and readability.

[5] Staff at ABC ID have indicated that subsequent evaluation activities (in progress) were attempting to evaluate voice and accountability.

shift in the ways that the development industry is used to treating the idea of impacts, but one which is in keeping with statements at the Congress on Communication for Development in Rome (The Communication Initiative, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) & The World Bank 2007: xxvii).

Conceptual tools that help project teams and stakeholders to navigate the theories and models of change are vital to improving the effectiveness of evaluation designs. Manyozo's (2012) framework for understanding the basic theories of media change were found to be highly useful, and show great potential for future work in this area.

The problem of the "proceduralization"

I uncovered a second and more latent barrier to effective media assistance evaluation when I analysed the material product of evaluation, the evaluation report, and its role in the functioning of the bureaucracy. In general, evaluations of development initiatives are seen as an important accountability mechanism (Chouinard 2013: 238-241), and in some circles, as a way to improve projects and draw lessons for future practice (Estrella et al. 2000; Johnson & Wilson 2009; Lennie & Tacchi 2013). However, my research suggests that these earnest goals rarely inform evaluations of media assistance. Instead, it is the development bureaucracies' demand for a document that conforms to the quality assurance criteria that drives evaluation practices. The donors' bureaucratic systems direct who undertakes evaluation, when they are undertaken, and what questions the evaluation should answer. Although this is a phenomenon common to many development sectors, it is equally relevant to discussions of effective media assistance evaluation.

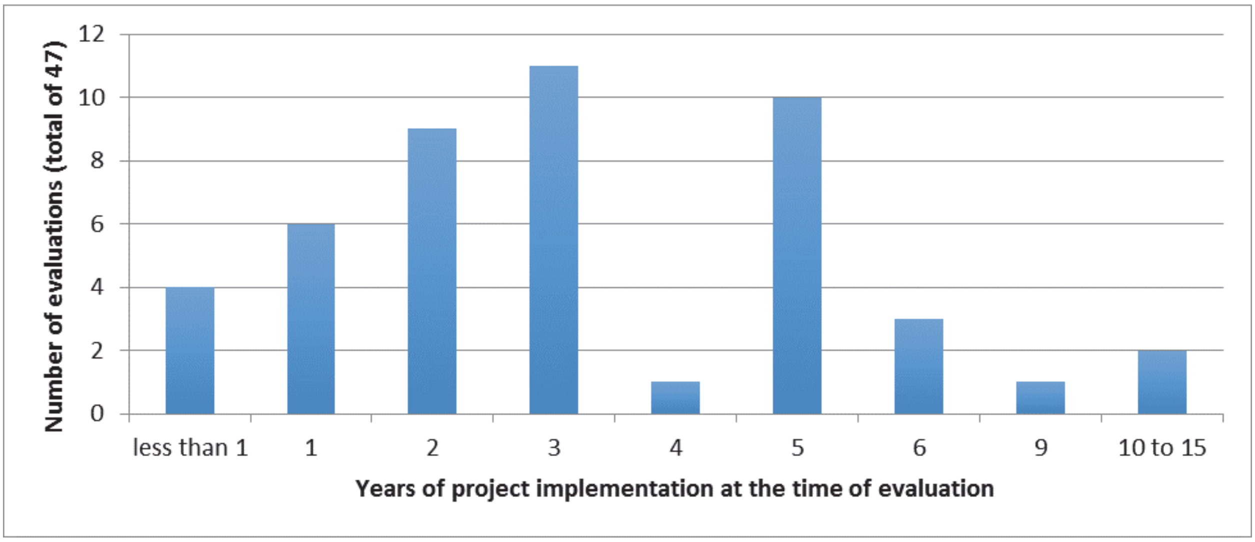
Media assistance evaluators interviewed for this research reported that from the early 2000s, interest in evaluation increased; however, they described a dual set of changes. There were increased efforts to consistently achieve better evaluations, leading to the development of sets of procedures, templates and guides. At the same time, there were increased pressures for delivery and less time to engage with the evaluation process. To explore this phenomenon further I draw upon Anderson, Brown and Jean's concept of "proceduralization" (2012: 65-82). These authors acknowledge that the creation of procedures is a genuine response to an endeavour to be more efficient through streamlining, simplifying and standardising repeated tasks so that these are undertaken in ways that are more consistent, transparent and reflective of best practice. However, while procedures sometimes achieve this, the authors found that both donors and recipients saw "downsides" to the increasing number of procedures in aid and development; in particular, that procedures can be counter-productive and cause people to "lose sight of the very values that these processes were intended to support" (Anderson, Brown, & Jean 2012: 66). They therefore use the term "proceduralization" to refer to

> "the codification of approaches that are meant to accomplish positive outcomes into mechanical checklists and templates that not only fail to achieve their intent but actually lead to even worse outcomes. The word is meant to resonate with "bureaucratization," which describes the process by which bureaucracies that are developed to accomplish large tasks become rigid and unresponsive to human concerns and the people who work in them become "bureaucrats"—often used as a pejorative term—who impede rather than facilitate accomplishment of the original task or mission" (Anderson, Brown, & Jean 2012: 67).

The influence of the procedures associated with evaluation of media assistance on the resulting evaluation practice was apparent in a range of ways. First, the timing of evaluations was found to be a product of the project cycle. In the sample of evaluation reports analysed in this research, clusters of evaluation reports were produced after two, three and five years of project implementation, with only a few taking place after four years of implementation (see Figure 1). This pattern suggests that the implementation of evaluation procedures is triggered by systematised time periods rather than by active decisions about when an evaluation is needed; and often, in the context of media assistance, this trigger comes too soon for any results to be measurable. Australian consultant Robyn Renneberg made a link between the timing of mid-term evaluations and the requirements further down the chain of the bureaucracy:

> "To even try and pretend that there was some kind of impact was an insult, I think. Unfortunately, usually you have to because the donors need it for their reporting to parliament. So that's when you say things like *(putting on a fake intellectual voice; humour intended)* 'while the evidence is not clear, it is reasonable to assume that at this point in time the impact in this area is blah blah blah'. Knowing full well that it probably isn't." (Renneberg 2013, pers. comm. 26 February)

Figure 1: Timing of evaluation – number of years of project implementation at the time of evaluation from the sample of 47 media assistance evaluation documents.



Second, standardised procedures are increasingly used as an alternative to spending time working through the specifics of evaluations in ways that were possible in the past. Birgitte Jallov, who is a regular consultant in media assistance and C4D, describes the changes in time pressures as this relates to the design of evaluations:

> "The donors are very pressed [for time]. There was a time where you spent time with the program officer, discussing approaches and so on. In the [19]90s I worked [with] fantastic people … sitting in DANIDA or Sida for days, and we designed the tools, tested and compared and so on. That doesn't happen anymore. [Donor staff] are so pressed, they don't have time." (Jallov 2013, pers. comm. 6 March)

Third, the resourcing patterns of donor systems have significant influences on evaluation practices. There was a high degree of repetition in descriptions of the methods used in the sample of 47 evaluation documents, with 37 of these (79%) basing findings principally on a document review and stakeholder interviews. However, the data collected for this research suggests that this approach is not dominant by deliberate design. Choices are constrained by the allocation of resources for evaluation at the end of the project, or at best, mid-way and at the end. Due to the lack of alternative options, methodologies were limited to what is possible, rather than what might be most useful. For example, media assistance evaluation consultant Mary Myers said:

> "I've never done anything from start to finish, or even baselines through mid-line to end-line … I tend to do one-offs. When organizations ask me to come in for an external evaluation, normally at the end of a program, they normally have limited time, a limited budget and they need to get a report to the donor ASAP and *(laughs)* it's all a bit of a rush. Quite often you wish that you could do it by the book, you wish you could have been there at the beginning, middle and end, and you wish you could have applied participatory methodologies — basically you wish that you had had time and money to do it in a decent way. On the whole, I've found that these sort of evaluations can be rather rushed, and a bit quick and dirty to be honest. (Myers 2013, pers. comm. 20 March)

Finally, the use of commissioned outsiders can also be viewed as an evaluation 'procedure'. The commissioning of consultants is used as a relatively controlled and repeatable technique for "operationalizing accountability" (Aho 1985; Brenneis 2006: 44; see also Power 1996), but not only is it based on simplistic notions of objectivity, it has problematic consequences for evaluations. In common with Chouinard (2013) and Cracknell (2000), my analysis found inherent weaknesses in premising the legitimacy of evaluations on "a detached and neutral role for evaluators" (Chouinard 2013: 244). While evaluation consultants are professionals who are commissioned to provide truthful accounts of a project, there is a need to critically engage with the assumptions and limitations of the idea that consultant evaluators can provide absolute objectivity.

The notion of neutrality and objectivity is problematic from before evaluators are event commissioned. Evaluators interviewed were aware that they have reputations for the kinds of evaluations they produce, and this influences the types of projects they are invited to evaluate. Once commissioned, evaluators are required to respond to the commissioners' predetermined evaluation design (Chouinard 2013: 244). The Terms of Reference (ToR) often directs the evaluation questions, criteria, sometimes the methods used, the allocated time, and the structure and length of the report. In this way, the ToR concentrate attention on what was proposed rather than on what actually happened, consistent with Anderson, Brown and Jean's observations of the broader trends in development evaluation (2012: 41).

Most problematic, however, is a perception of ownership over commissioned evaluation reports, which challenges the consultants' roles as independent evaluators. For example, one evaluator described her experience of being asked to make changes to a section of her report, which stated that aspects of the project were not going well:

> "They came back and said 'Well what are we going to tell our board with this evaluation that you've done?'. I didn't say it in so many words but I said that's your problem, I've said what I've said, you can tell the board what you like, but I would prefer if you didn't cut stuff out of my writing. But the trouble is I was paid by those people so in a way I suppose they felt that I should do what they wanted me to do, i.e. [in] a final version I should cut out certain words or nuance them ... So I had a long phone call with the director ... we went through word by word and [the director] said 'can you just nuance this word a bit or that word'. I said well OK if you want, but it's not very ethical, I mean, I've done what I've done." (Myers 2013, pers. comm. 20 March)

This situation is not unique, and similarly fraught encounters are reported in the evaluation literature (e.g. Patton 2008: 25; Fitzpatrick, Sanders & Worthen 2004: 419-421). In this system evaluation reports are simultaneously owned by the commissioner and expected to be independent of them. The client-consultant relationship provokes highly complex ethical and professional challenges to negotiate. To refer to these situations as entailing "objectivity" would be to over-simplify the complexities in how evaluation documents are produced.

There are, of course, many advantages of commissioning a consultant, including the openness with which statements of a sensitive nature can be made, the expertise they may bring, and the weight that the findings will have. Objectivity, however, is a much more complex expectation, is compromised by the commissioning process, the sense of ownership and agencies of the actors involved, and the sensitivities and ethical dilemmas faced. Such systems are not leading to effective evaluations. On this point I concur with Abbott of Internews, who argued that the combined problems of limited and post-completion resource allocation lead to an evaluation document, but not a "good evaluation" (2013, pers. comm. 26 July).

There are much better ways to make use of the consultants' methodological and comparative expertise, including using them as "evaluation coaches" (Fetterman 2001; Hanssen, Lawrenz & Dunet 2008) in the evaluation planning stages, or as scrutineers of evaluation by project teams. Both of these uses would be more likely to lead to richer sets of evidence on which to make funding decisions, but this would mean relinquishing the dependence on independence as a bureaucratic operationalization of legitimacy.

The epistemological and political undercurrents of media assistance evaluation

The third challenge to effective evaluation of media assistance is a lack of engagement with broader evaluation theory and scholarship. Beneath the surface of evaluation practice are a series of ontological fault lines, which, if not adequately acknowledged in media assistance evaluation planning, can cause incongruities and confusion. There are three primary epistemological tensions in evaluation that deserve more attention in the debates relating to media assistance evaluation. These relate to the setting evaluation objectives, the framing of change processes, and the use of participatory and collaborative evaluation approaches.

The first area of tension relates to different purposes and objectives of evaluation, and whether accountability ("proving") or project improvements ("improving") should be the focus of efforts. According to Cracknell, these are dichotomous objectives that cannot be reconciled within a single evaluation (2000: 55). In general, evaluations enjoy a largely unquestioned function of being vital to check the efficiency and effectiveness of tax-payer funds (Chouinard 2013: 238-241), however there are growing concerns of an overemphasis on accountability functions (Armytage 2011; Conlin & Stirrat 2008; Johnson & Wilson 2009: 8; Lennie & Tacchi 2013: 117), and that evaluations are increasingly seen as a mechanism for "demonstrate[ing] success" (Enghel & Wilkins 2012: 9), rather than as a tool for providing a critical engagement with the successes and failures of the approaches.

The idea of combining both proving and improving objectives in monitoring and evaluation planning and design was not seen as impossible by those interviewed for this research. In fact, it was seen as necessary. For example, one ABC ID staff member described demonstrating impacts and providing feedback as "simultaneous" processes (ABCID2 2013, pers. comm. 18 November).

Instead of viewing these as irreconcilable, careful evaluation design and planning can create a mutually reinforcing relationship between these two evaluation goals. Building knowledge about what is creating change, for whom and why, contributes concurrently to the bank of evidence of those changes, and can be analysed with a view to considering how initiatives could be improved and the impacts increased. Monitoring and evaluation designs that facilitate both evidence or indications of impact and learning-based objectives for project improvement are necessarily more complicated than the usual style evaluation (as outlined earlier) based on a consultant's review of project documentation and stakeholder interviews; however, as has been noted, this, too, has generally failed to effectively contribute to either improving or indeed proving impact.

The second area of tension relates to how the notion of change is framed in evaluation; specifically, there can be a clash between pursuing simplicity against retaining complexity. This complexity may relate to the project itself (such as the difficulty in developing a clear theory of change), to the complexity of the intervention environment, or a combination of both. Social development interventions (of which media assistance is an example) are frequently referred to as complex, since they are dependent on the political and social environment as a whole (Crawford 2003a: 87), and in this way are described as non-linear, emergent and "unknowable" in advance (Lennie & Tacchi 2013: 44-69; Patton 2011: 111-151). In addition, in any given development context there are multiple development actors, sometimes all involved in working towards similar objectives. These factors combine to make attribution of a cause to an effect difficult (Crawford 2003a: 87; Lennie & Tacchi 2013: 81-82).

There are two basic reactions evaluators can have to complexity: attempt to simplify it, or attempt to retain and deal with it (Patton 2011: 6). The Logical Framework is an example of a tool that has been developed within the development evaluation sector, intended to simplify complexity. By contrast, Lennie and Tacchi's research framework for evaluating communication for development (C4D) projects represents an example of an approach that draws on complexity theory and systems thinking (Lennie & Tacchi 2013).

One example of how this clash in perspectives can become problematic in evaluation of media assistance is the recent push for the use of baseline designs, which increasingly advocated as essential for improved media assistance evaluation practices (see Mefalopulos 2005: 255; Mosher 2011: 247; Taylor 2010: 2). Baseline designs typically collect data before the start of the project, with the intention of repeating the study at a later time to enable comparison and identification of changes. However, baseline designs inherently conflict with a view of media assistance as complex types of projects. Baseline designs assume straight-forward, linear impact trajectories in which changes occur consistently and gradually, when social changes in reality are often complex, unpredictable and non-linear (Woolcock 2009). Woolcock argues that depending on the timing of the follow-up study, follow-up data may not be able to perceive non-linear change trajectories, especially if situations worsen before they improve, or remain static for long periods before suddenly improving. Baseline designs similarly clash with learning-based evaluation objectives, since they require fidelity to the original project plan, rather than adaptation and flexibility in response to changing local conditions (Patton 2011: 155-159). These observed limitations led to a proposal for a "moving baseline" (Lennie & Tacchi 2013: 79), which suggests ongoing assembly of data that can be adapted and added to as the evaluation questions and needs change.

The third tension relates to the changing notions of who the evaluation should serve amid the push towards participatory evaluation against an ongoing pursuit of standardised methods for generating empirical evidence. These polemic positions are an extension of the "paradigm wars" in academic research in the social sciences (Armytage 2011: 270; Cracknell 2000: 329). Patton suggests that the differences between paradigms can be seen as between two opposing positions: one that sees change as being driven by experts in a top-down process of evaluation to identify blue-print solutions; and the other that involves bottom-up, locally-driven identification of problems and solutions, and judgements about the successes and value of changes (2011: 152-187). While the former is the normalised approach to development evaluation, according to Cracknell (2000), and continuing through to the present time, the trend towards participatory methods is the most significant change taking place in the field of evaluation, which is due to the paradigmatically opposed epistemological views about rigour and validity of evidence (Armytage 2011: 270-273; Chouinard 2013: 244). Participation has a long association with the C4D and CfSC (Communication for Social Change) fields, where communication and participation have been argued to be two sides of the same development coin (Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada [1998] 2005: 575). Consequently advocacy of participatory evaluation approaches, especially in academic scholarship, is particularly strong in this field (e.g. Lennie & Tacchi 2013; Parks, Gray-Felder, Hunt, & Byrne 2005). There has been no such traditional link between communication and participation in media assistance (with the exception of community media projects) and, therefore, much less awareness and emphasis on participatory evaluation of projects. There are, however, some identified complementarities between participation democratization assistance (Crawford 2003b; Hanberger 2006; Kapoor 1996, 2004; Patton 2002).

The findings of my research suggest a nuanced position on the potential use and role of participation in evaluation. Close analysis of the CCAP project, uncovered the existence of participatory principles and processes, even though the formal language of participation was not used to identify it as such. Participation in evaluation was repeatedly shown to improve the engagement, the sense of ownership, the quality of insights and the relevance of the strategies identified for solving problems or weaknesses. For example, PDI staff led and managed regular "Open-Line" talk-back shows where they invited members of the audience to call in with feedback, suggestions and their perspectives on the benefits of the program. At the same time, tensions arose when participation was imposed on radio staff, even when this was intended to facilitate capacity building and learning. For example, CCAP staff were pushing the team-leaders and executive producers (EPs) at the PDIs to fill in monthly reports and databases in order that they would develop evaluative insights. However, the PDI team-leaders and EPs saw little benefit for themselves in these tasks and resisted most tasks of this kind. Crucially, however, the research raised some challenges in incorporating participation, including the potential to over-burden participants and, more importantly, the potential risks of exposing participants to uncomfortable, even unsafe, situations, given the highly politicised environment (common to many media assistance project contexts). Therefore, participation can be useful, but not everything must be participatory if it is not feasible or practical.

Where I do strongly advocate the use of participatory approaches is in the design phase. Designing monitoring and evaluation in collaboration with all primary stakeholders would have several important benefits, including: increased engagement by the project partners and media staff in learning, since their concerns are built in and addressed, leading to better project outcomes; continuous improvement of projects, leading to better development outcomes; a reduction in insecurity through access to data about results throughout the project; and greater access to much more robust information throughout the life of the project, making it easier for donors (and other project stakeholders) to understand programs' objectives, and enabling earlier and informed funding decisions based on more and better evidence than they might otherwise have. These findings therefore support the position of other advocates of participatory monitoring and evaluation approaches, who see that the early planning stage is when participation is most important (Estrella 2000: 9; Parks et al. 2005: 16).

These three areas of epistemological debate in the broad evaluation field, including the objectives of evaluation, the framing of change-processes and the role of project stakeholders, underscore many of the tensions and frustrations in media assistance evaluation practice. Highlighting these debates shows that although the language of complexity, participation, and learning dot the development evaluation literature, development systems implicitly adopt opposing positions, valuing simplicity, expert driven knowledge, and accountability oriented documentation of spending. Situating practices within these contexts is vital improving the effectiveness of media assistance evaluation practice. Any media assistance evaluation tool or toolkit must be informed by and reconnected to these broader contestations in order to avoid conflicts and confusion.

Four Principles for Media Assistance Evaluation

As a way to capture the essence of the research findings in order that they may be used to inform evaluation practice four intersecting principles for media assistance evaluation will be presented here. In common with Patton (2011), I prefer to speak in terms of 'effective principles' to guide evaluation. Principles "have to be interpreted, and adapted to context", whereas 'best practices', are often highly prescriptive, specific and limiting (Patton 2011: 167), potentially resulting in inflexible procedures and templates similar to the problems discussed earlier. Similarly, principles, rather than toolkits, reinforce my argument that the challenges of media assistance evaluation relate to more than simple problems of evaluation methodology and methods. These principles complement, rather than replace or subsume, existing principles and frameworks for the evaluation of media, communication and development projects (e.g. Arsenault et al. 2011; Lennie & Tacchi 2013).

1. Plan early, evaluate regularly, adapt periodically

Although a monitoring and evaluation plan is usually required by donors, often most of the evaluation work is left until the completion of the project. The research findings show instead that evaluation efforts should be "front-loaded" (Abbott 2013, pers. comm. 26 July) so that the collection and analysis of data can begin as early as possible. Awareness of the systems within which monitoring and evaluation take place is vitally important to achieving this principle. Knowledge of the routines of the system can empower project stakeholders to take more control over the timing and focus of evaluations.

Rather than in minimal, time-bound bursts, as happens with a baseline, midline and endline design, data collection and analysis activities are instead ideally undertaken regularly. Continuous evaluation and analysis offers donors and project teams ongoing insights to inform decision-making.

While early planning is essential, flexibility and adaptability in evaluation designs are also vital. The evaluation design, although carefully negotiated and considered in the beginning, should be revisited periodically in order that it can be adapted to the changing needs of the project teams.

2. Involve stakeholders in planning and evaluation

In discussions on the potential for participatory approaches in evaluation, I suggest a balance of the opposing positions on participation. Participatory approaches should be used strategically; not every activity must be participatory if it is not practical or useful. As a priority, I advocate participatory evaluation planning and participatory interpretation workshops with other adaptations to methods to increase participation to be considered as they arise. Participatory involvement in evaluation planning increases the relevance and usefulness of the design for all stakeholders, including donors, project staff and partners (i.e. media staff and media organizations) alike. A negotiated evaluation design process can bring awareness and a frankness to the different stakes involved in evaluation. Donor bureaucracies are an inevitable part of the development system and therefore the donor's own reporting obligations cannot be ignored; however, these imperatives must be more evenly balanced with interests in generating a bank of evidence of the project's impact, and in learning and improving the project.

3. Evaluation designs are theoretically informed and framed

In common with Jones and Waisbord (2010), my research suggests that the use of ambiguous and ill-defined theories and models of change has a negative effect on evaluation design, since it becomes difficult to match the project objectives with relevant evaluation questions, and methods. To this end I drew on Manyozo's (2012) distillation of media, communication and development theories into three families of approaches in order to bring conceptual clarity to bear on this task. For media assistance impacts on governance, in particular, it was useful to reframe good governance as involving social processes of two-way communication between citizens and authorities. More accessible and comprehensible theories will enable more relevant evaluation questions to be asked, thus leading to better evaluations.

4. Proving and improving

While Cracknell (2000: 55) asserts that evaluations can seldom both prove and improve, a symbiotic relationship between these two objectives can be perceived. Data and evidence collected in relation to impact and change can and should inform areas that can be improved or focused upon to achieve maximum impact. I have also questioned the basis on which evaluation is considered legitimate, often based on the practice of commissioning a consultant evaluator. This practice, however, does more to satisfy the bureaucracy's accountability systems than it does to achieve in-depth insights and rigorous evidence. To take advantage of the skills and outsider status of consultants, it can be suggested that a more valuable role for consultants would be as facilitators and coaches during the evaluation design process, and later as scrutineers over internal research and evaluation. In this way, the ownership and responsibilities of evaluation can be shared among project stakeholders, while still satisfying the donor's need for an independent quality check.

Conclusion

Despite a slow start, attention to evaluation of media assistance has gained considerable momentum in the past decade. While there has been progress in the identification of possible methods, there remain at least three barriers to effective applications of appropriate methods in media assistance project evaluations. These include conceptual ambiguities that lead to a mismatch between the project objectives, models of change, evaluation questions and methods; bureaucratic systems that impede planned and continuous monitoring and evaluation processes; and a lack of consideration of the broader epistemological debates in evaluation.

The findings of this research support the moves by many media assistance organizations (including ABC ID, BBC Media Action and Internews) to increase their internal evaluation budgets and take greater leadership on collecting and analysing monitoring and evaluation data. This enables evidence of impact to be collected throughout the project, which can then contribute to improving the project and increasing the impact.

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