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## **From the Field: Bring back the Audience: A Discussion of the Lack of Audience Research in the Field of Media Development**

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**Abstract:** This paper strives to highlight the significant lack of audience research in the field of media development and the consequences of this gap – both for project design and policy making – but also for broader efforts to integrate media into governance debates. Whilst this lack of evidence has been noted before, a number of recently published scoping reviews of the relevant literature now enable us to discuss, in detail, the extent and nature of this gap in our knowledge.

**Keywords:** audience research, media assistance, evaluation, Global South

### **Introduction**

The primary aim of this paper is to draw attention to the significant lack of audience research in the field of media development – both in academia and in grey literature. This paper seeks to highlight the consequences of this gap for project design and policy making, but also for broader efforts to integrate media into governance debates. The focus here is on research which measures changing levels of media consumption amongst target audiences. Those kinds of – often qualitative – audience research will also be taken into account which seeks to understand the complex, contingent and context-specific ways in which citizens make use of the media, within governance processes and as part of their daily lives. This lack of evidence has been noted before. However, a number of recently published scoping reviews of the relevant literature now enable us to discuss, in detail, the extent of this gap in our knowledge.

## The state of audience research

In 2014, Emrys Shoemaker and Nicole Stremlau published the results of a scoping review of existing academic literature concerned with the role of the media in conflict and post-conflict situations. According to Shoemaker and Stremlau, most of the 32 papers identified in their database search adopted the assumption that media has a direct effect on audiences.

The broader context or environment was seldom analysed in-depth but was rather dominated by a focus on the ways in which media were seen to be either instigating violence or 'injecting' peaceful ideas into the populous. (Shoemaker & Stremlau 2014: 185)

In one paper concerned with print media in Northern Uganda, for example, the authors state that, "access to information implies a form of empowerment, or better still, it signifies freedom from ignorance, freedom from servitude and ultimately freedom to choose" (Acayo & Mnjama 2004).

This instrumentalist view of the media is inaccurate. The potential effects of different media on individuals are made up of a complex combination of potential long-term and short-term processes which are actively negotiated by audiences and contingent upon both the contexts in which media are consumed and the broader lifeworld's of audiences. Put simply, we all respond differently to media content depending on, amongst other things, our mood, knowledge, previous experiences, attention, trust, media habits and personal circumstances. To claim that internet access always leads to empowerment, for example, or to imply that hate speech always has the same, uniform effect on all audiences, is to overlook the complexities of audience reception.

Indeed, by way of illustration of the value of audience research, Shoemaker and Stremlau also find that this 'direct effects' theory of the media was only ever directly challenged within studies which made use of some form of audience research. Unfortunately, though, these studies were in a clear minority. Of the 32 studies they identified, only 8 used any data relating to audiences. Furthermore, of these 8 studies, only 2 explained explicitly how they understood media effects to operate. Both of these studies analysed the impact of the same donor financed radio soap opera in Rwanda - *Musekweya* (New Dawn).

In a second, parallel, search for empirical research relevant to media development, Stremlau (2014) conducted a study which sought to track down 'local' research – this time about the role of new media only in peacebuilding and state building. Specifically, the aim was to identify research "on Africa by Africans" in grey literature from public bodies and NGOs as well as in PhD and Masters Theses from African universities. Unfortunately, Stremlau (2014) found little difference in the content and scope of evidence in this research compared to similar studies in the Global North. In particular, she describes an absence of scholarship concerning how users actually engaged with the media.

There was a primary focus on the policies and projects rather than on how people and communities either make use of, or do not make use of, these communication tools... There were very few references to how new media could integrate with more localised and contextual governance processes and thus contribute to state-building efforts that were unique to a particular country, group or location. In some cases, we often found that the research was even more normative or techno-deterministic than research coming from the North (Stremlau 2014: 5-7).

A third recent survey of relevant literature, conducted by Jessica Noske-Turner (2015), focusses on the methodologies of project evaluations. Based on the results of a study of 47 evaluation documents of media assistance programs and projects between 2002-2012, Noske-Turner identifies a dominant “template” for media assistance evaluations. This “dominant approach” consists of a consultant visiting the field for one or two weeks, three to five years after the project has begun, reviewing project documents and undertaking stakeholder interviews. This “quick and dirty” collection of “success stories” was adopted by 37 of the 47 (79%) evaluations. This method of evaluation is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because it allows little room for a thorough examination of the uses of media by different audiences. Noske-Turner adds that when audience surveys were conducted as part of an evaluation, they were often (1) too small to ensure statistical significance, (2) did not sufficiently target rural or poor audiences and (3) focussed only on reach and listenership rather than also probing audiences' use of information. There are very good reasons why many media assistance evaluations adopt this dominant “template”, including a lack of time, planning and resources. The point here is not to criticise the evaluators but to point out that, as a result of this dominant approach, project evaluations seldom produce robust evidence regarding what audiences actually do with media in relation to governance.

A fourth survey, done by Devra Moehler (2013), reviewed the small body of pioneering field experiments on media and political development. The findings underscore the need to conduct further research.

Paluck (2010a) observed that a radio programme designed to increase tolerance achieved the desired changes in norms and behaviours (but not beliefs) in Rwanda, while a programme with the same goal decreased tolerance in the DRC. Paluck et al. (2011) learnt that a radio and discussion-based civic education initiative in South Sudan increased democratic attitudes and behaviours, but decreased support for women's involvement in politics. Bailard (2012a; 2012b) documented that internet exposure increased democratic attitudes in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Tanzania, but also decreased electoral participation. Conroy-Krutz and Moehler (2013) discovered that partisan media in Ghana decreased polarisation, while neutral political talk radio had no effect. Bleck and Michelitch (2013) also discovered that biased junta-controlled media in Mali increased unity sentiments, but also increased support for undemocratic policies favoured by the junta (Moehler 2013: 13).

A lack of audience-oriented approaches can also be observed in some manuals, guidelines and other types of practical media development literature. For example, four self-assessment tools for community radios have been published in the last few years (by the Commonwealth Educational Media Center for Asia in 2013; by

the Wits Radio Academy in 2013; by the UNESCO Chair on Community Radio in 2013; and by the Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists in 2009). They claim to cover all relevant fields for a “healthy community radio station” (Krüger et al. 2013), including issues like mission and governance of a community radio station, management and staffing, infrastructure and finances, programming and community involvement. However, none of them mentions audience research as an integral element for performance assessment and improvement.

A final key element which has been widely neglected in international media assistance is the lack of reliable and accessible quantitative audience research data in many developing countries. Frère (2016) mentions the example of Burundi where only two national audience surveys have been conducted in the last twenty years. Both Foster (2014) and the 2014 FoME symposium on audience research (FoME 2014) have highlighted the crucial importance of accurate quantitative audience research data for the effective functioning of media markets in developing countries. Audience research provides a platform for businesses to make rational decisions about advertising placement, and income raised from a variety of advertisers helps media houses to become politically less dependent. According to Evan Tachovsky, Impact Officer at the Media Development Investment Fund (MDIF),

There's a lot of corruption [in advertising], especially when there's no third-party data about audiences. There ends up being a lot of corruption, a lot of kick-backs... For the vast majority of our countries, research isn't used, or used in only a cursory way, so it never achieves full commercial effect. People aren't selling themselves as well as they could to potential ad buyers. On the other hand, how much weight would those buyers put into the metrics if they aren't measured by a professional, third-party entity? And so, on both sides, there can be limited incentives to engage in this process. [The absence of data] creates huge problems [for the media] to grow and advance as businesses (cited in Foster 2014: 10).

Many developing countries do not have established Joint Industry Committees (JIC), i.e. independent industry bodies where the three main stakeholders (media houses, advertisers and independent third-party research organizations) jointly manage and control national audience measurement activities in a transparent way. Only recently has international media assistance begun to help establish JIC in Sudan and in Nepal (FoME 2014).

### **The significance and future of audience research in media development**

Of course, Noske-Turner (2015), Stremlau (2014), Shoemaker and Stremlau (2014) and Moehler's (2013) methodologies are, by their own admission, also limited. Shoemaker and Stremlau's keyword search, for example, only focussed on research about 21 specific countries and did not include evidence published in books. Their results do not, therefore, offer an entirely accurate reflection of the state of the available evidence. Nevertheless, it would be difficult to deny that, in general, robust audience research is lacking in the field of media development. In an era of

evidence-based policy making, this is problematic for those wishing to raise the profile of media in debates about governance. Equally, for those seeking to design effective media development interventions, there is insufficient evidence to explain the precise ways in which, and circumstances under which, media may contribute to good governance (and vice versa).

Detailed audience research is also important for challenging optimistic and universalising normative ideals about the role that media *should* play in promoting good governance. In the 1970s, one of the dominant paradigms of development communication was ‘media imperialism’ – or the claim that the dominance of mass media from more powerful countries served to spread an inappropriate and exploitative capitalist and ‘Western’ culture to less powerful ones (Schiller 1976). This theory rested, at least partly, on the assumption that ‘Western’ ideology was ‘carried’ by mainstream media and injected into the minds of non-Western audiences. The fallacy of this assumption was exposed by a number of audience studies which revealed the dynamics and complexities of the ways in which different audiences interpret content (Ang 1985). In the same way, audience research focussed on the perspectives of ordinary citizens will likely expose and challenge the underlying assumptions within media development. Shoemaker and Stremlau (2014) point out that, within the wider governance research agenda, for example, research which has adopted the perspective of citizens or end-users has successfully challenged traditional state-centric view of governance and instead highlighted the importance of hybrid and informal systems of governance.

Indeed, several studies published recently have helped to point out the complexity of citizen’s political uses of the media. Nell Haynes (2016: 4), for example, argues that in the city of Alto Hospicio in northern Chile, “most of what people post on social media is in some sense connected to the performance, maintenance or examination of what it means to be a good citizen”. In particular, social media is a place where residents express their feelings of marginalisation but also strengthen their own sense of community. Haynes’ conclusions are based on 15 months of ethnographic research in the city. The implication of such research is that citizens should be understood, not simply as passive *consumers* of media, but as active *users* and *producers* of media. Moreover, this active media use is often related directly to governance issues, though not always in predictable or obvious ways.

Audience segmentation is one way of beginning to capture the complexity of citizen’s media use and political engagement. BBC Media Action has developed various multi-method research studies which segmented their audiences according to their political engagement or to their responsiveness to development issues. For example, a household survey across 11 of Burma’s 14 states and regions on “The media’s role in citizen engagement” (Larkin & Baskett 2014) distinguished between four groups into which interviewees could be categorised: disengaged (35%), passively engaged (22%), informally engaged (23%) and formally engaged (20%). Categorising citizen engagement in this way can be useful in identifying those who

need most support or encouragement to engage with governance processes. Audience segmentation was also used as a diagnostic tool for the “Climate Asia” project (Climate Asia 2013). This project claims to be “the world’s largest study of people’s everyday experience of climate change”.<sup>1</sup> It surveyed 33,500 people across seven Asian countries, identifying different information needs for five audience segments (the “surviving”, the “struggling”, the “adapting”, the “willing” and the “unaffected”).

Given the significance of audience research, the following issues are worth considering in the design of future projects and studies.

1. **De-centring the media.** Most existing research into media development pre-supposes the importance of media in governance processes. Yet there may be circumstances in which the media’s role is not important. Research has to be open to these possibilities.
2. **Triangulation.** Individuals are not always willing or able to offer an accurate and reliable account of their media habits when responding to surveys or as part of a focus group. Comparing data gathered from multiple contexts, over a period of time, is a useful way of increasing the credibility and validity of the results. Additional methods may include audience diaries and observational data.
3. **Strengthening audience research capacities in developing countries.** The establishment of independent audience research bodies (Joint Industry Committees), the training of qualified audience researchers in developing countries and improved access to audience research data should be actively supported by the international media assistance community. An interesting example of an independent, non-partisan, and state-supported national media advisory entity is the Peruvian *Consejo Consultivo de Radio y Television* (CONCORTV) which since 2005 has provided noteworthy stimuli for “strengthening good practices in Peruvian radio and television” ([www.concortv.gob.pe/nosotros](http://www.concortv.gob.pe/nosotros)) by publishing audience surveys, content analyses and other quantitative and qualitative studies on the Peruvian media sector.

Of course, generating research which takes account of even some of these issues will inevitably require a significant amount of resources. However, Moehler’s (2013) survey of “experimental” media and governance projects has shown that rigorous audience research may refute various assumptions underlying media development projects and therefore contribute to significant improvements in project and programme planning. In addition, supporting an independent and reliable audience research sector in developing countries would be an important step towards a sustainable media market in these countries.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/climateasiadataportal>.

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