

# Can media build states?

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Everyone in rich democracies like Britain assumes that a free media is a vital part of our liberal political system. But can journalism contribute to creating a thriving society where freedom is a novelty and resources are small? Is a free press a luxury in a country trying to get on its feet again after a war or civil conflict? Should aid money to fragile states and developing countries go to health, education and the economy rather than to supporting journalism?

These were the big questions put to a group of media and Development experts at a seminar held in Brighton at the [Institute for Development Studies](#) supported by the [BBC World Service Trust](#).

Polis has done a lot of work in this area. We started with a big international [conference](#) on Democracy, Development and the Media in Africa and most recently we held a [seminar](#) looking at the Guardian's collaboration on the [Katine Project](#) with the medical agency Amref.

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My working assumption is that journalism IS vital to promoting good governance. We know that the media is never perfect, but like democracy, it seems to be associated with freedom and prospering societies.

However, the role of [Radio Collines](#) in provoking community violence during the 1994 [Rwandan genocide](#) is just one extreme instance of the negative effects media can have.

Even in Kenya, a country with a pretty sophisticated and free media, radio stations stand accused of stirring up hatred during the recent post-election violence.

The IDS seminar showed that this is a complex areas:

1. How do you define media?
2. How to measure its effects?
3. How do you balance regulation with giving people a voice?
4. What kind of media do you want to support? private, public, local, national, analogue, digital? popular or elite?

I think there is a paradox here, especially for developing journalism. There is little incentive for anyone who has power: the government, the NGOs, the donors, to create something that can hold it to account and therefore, by implication, possibly take some its power away.

So leaders who want to get aid, charities who want to hand it out, and Western governments who want to use aid to change the world, all talk about the virtues of a free media. But very often, they don't like it when it actually happens and starts to subject them to scrutiny.

The [BBC World Service Trust](#) is one of the bigger media development agencies that trains journalists and supports media around the world. Gerry Power from BBC WST showed how their work is having a direct impact on political processes.

They have created a touring Question Time programme for [Bangladesh](#), and election phone-ins in [Sierra Leone](#), for example. They sound like good projects but WST Research boss James Deane admitted that they don't always know what works.

James said they would like to know a lot more about:

*How does free media fit in with different political system, such as neopatrimonialism? Tribal Leaders may not be the most democratic form of governance but it is how many countries are run. If you undermine those systems through media reform, you might cause chaos.*

*So how do you sequence your media development work? Do you rush in hoping for full freedom or do you accept that accountability must wait?*

*Even when media acts as a watchdog, exposing corruption, for example, does it actually change anything? Do the powerful behave differently because of media oversight?*

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And as James said, even when there is research it lacks concrete data and is usually done in isolation. Development people don't talk enough to Media people and generally media is seen as a rather slippery subject (a view commonly held of journalists too, I find).

[Jo Wheeler from IDS](#) put the media in the wider context of citizenship. People create citizenship through their actions, she said, it can't be imposed or created. And violence – be it criminal or political – easily destroys that fragile relationship between the state and the individual.

“Participatory Communication” was a way of trying to support that citizenship process and protect it from the fear, dislocation and disruption of violence in many developing countries.

Jo gave the example of videos made with poor people in Brazilian slums about aspects of their lives which were then shown in local cinemas.

I am very sympathetic to this approach. It focuses on what Jo calls the ‘assets’ of the public, rather than the ‘deficits’ of a poor community. Any media, be it small scale community projects or a more mass news media organisation, will always be more sustainable and relevant if public participation is built in to all aspects of production and consumption. This all feels part of [my vision](#) of future media as more [Networked](#).

[favella.jpg](#) But one of the information gaps in this field is knowing what people want from media, what they do with it, and what impact it has on their lives. We can measure the success of, say, Education Development work by literacy rates and to an extent, by incomes. But how do you decide what kind of media a rural Sudanese woman wants compared to, say, a young man in a Brazilian favella?

This all matters because the British government spends billions of taxpayer's money trying to build ‘effective states’. And as the Dfid representative at the IDS seminar admitted, they don't have enough research on what works either.

Perhaps the moment when media can matter most is at election time. Democracies are not just about voting, but it is the moment when the system comes under most stress. It is at that point when media can make trouble or make it work.

[kenyaelex.jpg](#)

A presentation on how Kenyan bloggers responded to the violence after last year's nasty post-election violence showed how political media is changing.

The blogosphere opened up whole new spaces for comment and reporting. The blogs were both Kenyan based and international. Some of the bloggers gave powerful eye-witness accounts and emotional responses. Another produced a Google map of the major incidents.

Meanwhile the wonderful [Africa Expat Wives Club](#) blog reported that their lives was going on pretty much as normal! Other blogs campaigned for political action both in Kenya but also to mobilise international pressure.

Mobile phones had a big impact too. Text messages were circulated containing threats, rumour and news. Rumour has always been a force in any crisis, but the prevalence of mobile phones means it traveled a lot faster.

africamobile.jpg

We have seen how the new media technologies such as blogs and Twitter contributed to building participation in the 2008 American election. They are now starting to be used to mobilise voters elsewhere. But just because it is new, doesn't make it virtuous. Anonymous, fast communication can also be used to poison political discourses as well as increase participation. So can 'Old Media'.

James Deane has written a very good [report](#) on the media's role in the Kenyan election violence. It blames commercial vernacular radio in Kenya for stirring up communal hostilities. But as James says, there was also highly responsible media which reported well and in some cases worked for peace.

The problem is that we just don't have the research to understand what happened and what difference media made. What this seminar did make clear, however, is that this is a set of topics where different disciplines need to work together. It is impossible to see media in isolation from the political and social forces that create and sometimes damage the media ecology.

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