

**WHAT CAN WE
LEARN FROM FIELD
EXPERIMENTS
ON MEDIA,
COMMUNICATION
AND GOVERNANCE?**

Contributing to the evidence base

This research briefing draws on findings from a research report by Devra Moehler, called Democracy, governance and randomised media assistance. To read more please visit: www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publicationsandpress/research.html.

BBC Media Action also made a financial contribution to a field experiment Moehler conducted exploring the effects of partisan and neutral radio in Ghana. A working paper about this research by Jeffrey Conroy-Krutz and Devra Moehler is available on www.asc.upenn.edu/news/Moehler/moderation_from_bias_11_01_13.pdf.

BBC Media Action uses our Bridging Theory and Practice series to share our evidence and learning on what works in measuring and understanding media and development interventions. This series is designed for all policy-makers, practitioners and researchers with an interest in evidence-based decision-making.

Acknowledgements

This briefing was written by Anna Godfrey. It is based on a review by Devra Moehler, assistant professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, and we are grateful to her for conducting it.

A review of research evidence

The evidence debate

What constitutes good evidence is currently subject to intense debate within the international development community. There is particular interest in making greater use of experimental and quasi-experimental research methods to assess the effect and impact of development interventions. This briefing shares the findings of a review of such methods used to evaluate the impact of media and media assistance on governance outcomes. It was commissioned by BBC Media Action and conducted by Devra Moehler of the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, USA.

The review identified only nine field experiments completed or in progress, and several sets of quasi-experimental studies. Together, these studies revealed that, while media initiatives have led to positive governance outcomes, including improved accountability, they have also at times had unexpected adverse effects. Moreover, they have been confined to a small number of countries, and the research questions have been linked to specific interventions and outcomes, which makes generalising difficult.

Through this review, the author suggests three opportunities and challenges for the use of field experiments in the media assistance sector.

What is a field experiment?

In this paper, the term “field experiment” refers to an experiment conducted in a real-world setting. They are also known as randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Individuals or units are randomly assigned to a treatment group that receives the intervention, or a control group that does not receive the intervention. This creates comparable groups that are, on average, expected to be statistically equivalent to one another, given appropriate sample sizes. Therefore the control group provides a valid estimate of what would have happened in the absence of the intervention.

What is a quasi-experimental study?

A quasi-experimental study resembles a field experiment, except for the fact that there is no random assignment of participants to groups. Sources of variation are generated by the context, rather than by the experimenter.

These are not widely known among donors or practitioners and are presented on the findings page of this research briefing.

Background on governance field experiments

In recent years, the use of field experiments to study the impact of development assistance on governance outcomes has grown tremendously.

There is a long-standing debate about whether randomised controlled trials are superior or inferior to other methods for evaluating and informing development assistance programmes. Neither the paper nor this briefing stake out a position. Rather, the starting point for this briefing is that field experiments are one potential tool among many in an evaluator's toolkit.

Most of these experiments are concentrated within the sectors of elections, community and local governance, and service delivery. Media assistance (or media development) – defined as activities aimed at strengthening the media to be independent, pluralistic and professional – has been largely overlooked. This review aims to address that gap.



Current research shows mixed results

Of the nine field experiments identified in the review, two studies showed the positive effects of media on informed voting, which is thought to lead to better governance and improved accountability. However, others had mixed or negative effects.



India

In the capital, Delhi, one experiment discovered that distribution of a newspaper containing information on the performance and qualifications of incumbents increased voter turnout, increased votes for better-performing incumbents and reduced vote buying.



Mozambique

Another experiment similarly found that a voter education programme via SMS and newspaper increased voter turnout and political knowledge.



Vietnam

A study in this single-party state showed that making the performance of national assembly delegates public on the internet had two unintended outcomes. Delegates of constituencies with higher internet penetration became more likely to behave in a way that supported the regime. Furthermore, delegates who were more outspoken and critical of the one-party state were less likely to be re-elected when their activities to promote democracy were made public.

Radio is one of the media assessed in the review.
Photo credit: Giacomo Pirozzi, Panos Pictures

Belief and behaviour change: the impact of media varies

Field experiments with radio listening groups were conducted in Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo to see if programmes about intergroup conflict and reconciliation could help to reduce conflict and prejudice.



Rwanda

A field experiment found that a soap opera about reconciliation did not change listeners' beliefs, but did change social norms, which, in turn, changed their behaviour. For example, those exposed to the reconciliation programme were more likely to negotiate actively, openly express their opinions on sensitive topics and co-operate with others.



Democratic Republic of Congo

A talk show that encouraged discussion about intergroup conflict and co-operation actually heightened tensions and intolerance.



South Sudan

A field experiment about a radio-based civic education project using listening groups in Juba, the capital, showed that the discussion of radio programmes increased learning. In addition, discussion significantly affected behaviour. However, these results varied by programme topic. For example, women's rights programming did not achieve its intended effects compared to programmes on elections and corruption, which did.

Scarce and divergent evidence requires more research

The studies conducted to date have been confined to a small number of countries, or one location or city within a country, and the research questions posed were linked to specific intervention and governance outcomes. As a result, there is a limit to what policy-makers and practitioners can infer.

Divergent findings highlight the dangers of generalising from one type of programme or topic in one country to all types of programming and topics in all countries. The review underscores the need to articulate our theories of change clearly and test our underlying assumptions about media effects. If our assumptions about how media affects governance are incorrect, then so too will be media interventions to achieve governance outcomes.

To strengthen the evidence base, practitioners, researchers and donors need to agree which research questions can and should be answered using experimental research, and, in its absence, to agree what constitutes good evidence.

Conclusions

BBC Media Action has a strong organisational focus on research, evaluation and learning, and aspires to be an evidence-based organisation. Experimental and quasi-experimental studies, however, can be technically demanding, lengthy and costly, raising questions about whether they represent value for money. Devra Moehler's review was intended to help BBC Media Action learn from existing experimental and quasi-experimental research to evaluate the impact of media assistance on governance outcomes. It also supports us to determine whether, when, how and why to use experimental and quasi-experimental methods in future.

While the review highlights an opportunity for more experimental research, it also identifies that the complexity of media development may hinder the efficacy of experimental evaluation.

Research on individual vs organisational change

The review points out that interventions aimed at individuals best lend themselves to experimentation. This could incentivise future experimental research to answer questions focused on individual change rather than wider organisational and systemic change.

For example it would be relatively easy to assess whether a training course is effective. Researchers can randomly assign the journalists into training using different methods and assess the uptake and implementation of skills. However, it would be much harder to assess how strengthening capacity affects a media organisation, its editorial values and content, audiences and media–state relations. This is particularly the case when there isn't a natural comparison group, sometimes known as a counterfactual, such as with a state broadcaster.

Agreeing on which methods fit which questions

Designing such experiments will be challenging. We should be prepared to discover that experimentation may not be feasible or relevant for evaluation. To strengthen the evidence base, practitioners, researchers and donors need to agree which research questions can and should be answered using experimental research, and, in its absence, to agree what constitutes good evidence.

Value for money considerations should also play a role in deciding whether and when to use experimental and quasi-experimental methods. Some of the studies included in this review cost anywhere from £12,500 to £125,000 and run from six months to three-and-a-half years. Each study involved an academic who often provided pro bono technical expertise.

Because it is easier to design field experiments with certain types of interventions, field experiments might fail to address particular questions, even whole domains, that are of great interest to practitioners.

Key findings and implications

Opportunities

Through this review, the author suggests three opportunities for the use of field experiments in the media assistance sector:

In media-scarce environments. For example, limited broadcast range allows researchers to compare people with and without access to the media under investigation. Making use of the common practice of listening to the radio in groups can create similar conditions.

To test assumptions about media effects. For example, testing unverified assumptions about how media affects democracy and governance can provoke greater reflection about programme goals and theories of change.

To investigate influences on media. The limited studies in the review have largely investigated media effects; however, there is some research to suggest that institutions affect media quality and, ultimately, democratic development. As yet, field experiments have not been conducted on the factors that influence media content, practices and reach.

Challenges

The author also suggests three challenges when conducting field experiments in the media assistance sector:

Level of the intervention. Often media assistance programmes target national broadcasters, but these are more challenging to evaluate with field experiments. Interventions that involve a large number of “units”, such as individual journalists or media outlets, are more amenable to field experiments. Thus experimental evidence will tend to accumulate where a large number of units are available.

Complexity of the intervention. Media assistance programmes designed to improve governance tend to combine different activities targeted at a diverse range of beneficiaries. This poses significant challenges when designing field experiments, such as difficulty ensuring that a control group is not exposed to any aspect of an intervention.

Research planning under ambiguity. Programme objectives and activities typically evolve over time. While flexibility can lead to responsive development interventions, it can make it difficult to design an experiment.

Implications

The review also highlights two issues when it comes to interpreting the results of field experiments and drawing wider policy conclusions. Because it is easier to design field experiments with certain types of interventions, field experiments might fail to address particular questions, and even whole domains, that are of great interest to practitioners, donors and policy-makers.

The accumulation of experimental evidence from certain types of cases and not others can lead to distorted conclusions about what works and what does not. The parameters of the cases must be taken into account when drawing policy lessons.

Media and audience research: a key part of BBC Media Action's work

BBC Media Action, the international development organisation of the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), uses the power of media and communication to support people to shape their own lives. Working with broadcasters, governments, other organisations and donors, we provide information and stimulate positive change in the areas of governance, health, resilience and humanitarian response. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) supports us to work with the media in 14 countries across Africa, the Middle East and Asia, and we have projects in more than 25 countries overall. This research briefing was prepared thanks to DFID funding.

This project will contribute to state–society relations and support the empowerment of individuals to hold their government to account. Using research, evaluation and learning reviews, it also aims to contribute to the evidence base on the role of media and communication in development.

The content of this briefing is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself or of any donors supporting our work.

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