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THE MEDIA AND CONFLICT

An assessment of the evidence

EVIDENCE BRIEF

There are frequent claims that the media promotes or prevents conflict; however there is little evidence to support or refute these claims

About this brief

This paper summarises a systematic evidence review by Schoemaker and Stremlau (forthcoming), entitled *Media and Conflict: an assessment of the evidence.* It was produced by the Justice and Security Research Programme (JSRP), a research consortium funded by the Governance, Conflict and Social Development team in DFID's Research and Evidence Division. This paper discusses the strength of the evidence that currently exists around the role of media and information in periods of conflict and political change.

Key Findings

- The evidence suggests the need for caution when planning interventions using media and technology for political change.
- Interventions using media and technology in fragile and conflict affected situations should be viewed as innovative rather than tried and tested.
- The media appears to play a different role in the developing world than is often assumed, and local realities are insufficiently explored and understood.
- Rigorous evaluations should be a key component of future media interventions.

Research gaps

Given the current large research gaps, there is a clear need for:

- More local level empirical data to gather evidence of how media impacts affected communities.
- Larger, quantitative, comparative studies, mapping change over longer periods of time.
- Research in new contexts and countries.
- Greater examination of wider contextual factors, and the interplay between different forms of media and data.
- More transparent methodologies, particularly in qualitative research.
- More explicit theories of change, outlining assumptions.
- Evidence on the role that media and technology play in hybrid spaces of governance – where formal and informal governance interact and both play key roles.
- More engagement with existing academic literature; including literature from the media studies field around the role media plays in influencing behaviour, and the well-established body of literature on ICTs in development.

How to use this brief

This brief is designed to provide an overview of the key evidence discussed in the full review, to assist policymakers and researchers in assessing the evidence in this field. The evidence is deeply contextual and this brief provides only a broad summary. It is not designed to provide advice on which interventions are more or less appropriate in particular contexts.

Recommendations

There is relatively little evidence to confirm or reject claims that media promotes or prevents conflict. Interventions involving media in fragile or post-conflict states should be considered innovative (as opposed to 'tried and tested').

Methodology

The evidence review used search strings to scan 19 journal databases. 22,000 papers were identified, and were filtered by publication date (post-1990) and by country (covering 19 countries with experience of conflict, and/or where media and technology were associated with significant political events). This yielded 32 papers for review. These 32 papers were supplemented by additional papers selected by experts in the field. Evidence was then graded according to a uniform set of criteria, assessing the level and quality of empirical data and the quality of analysis.

Summary map of Evidence
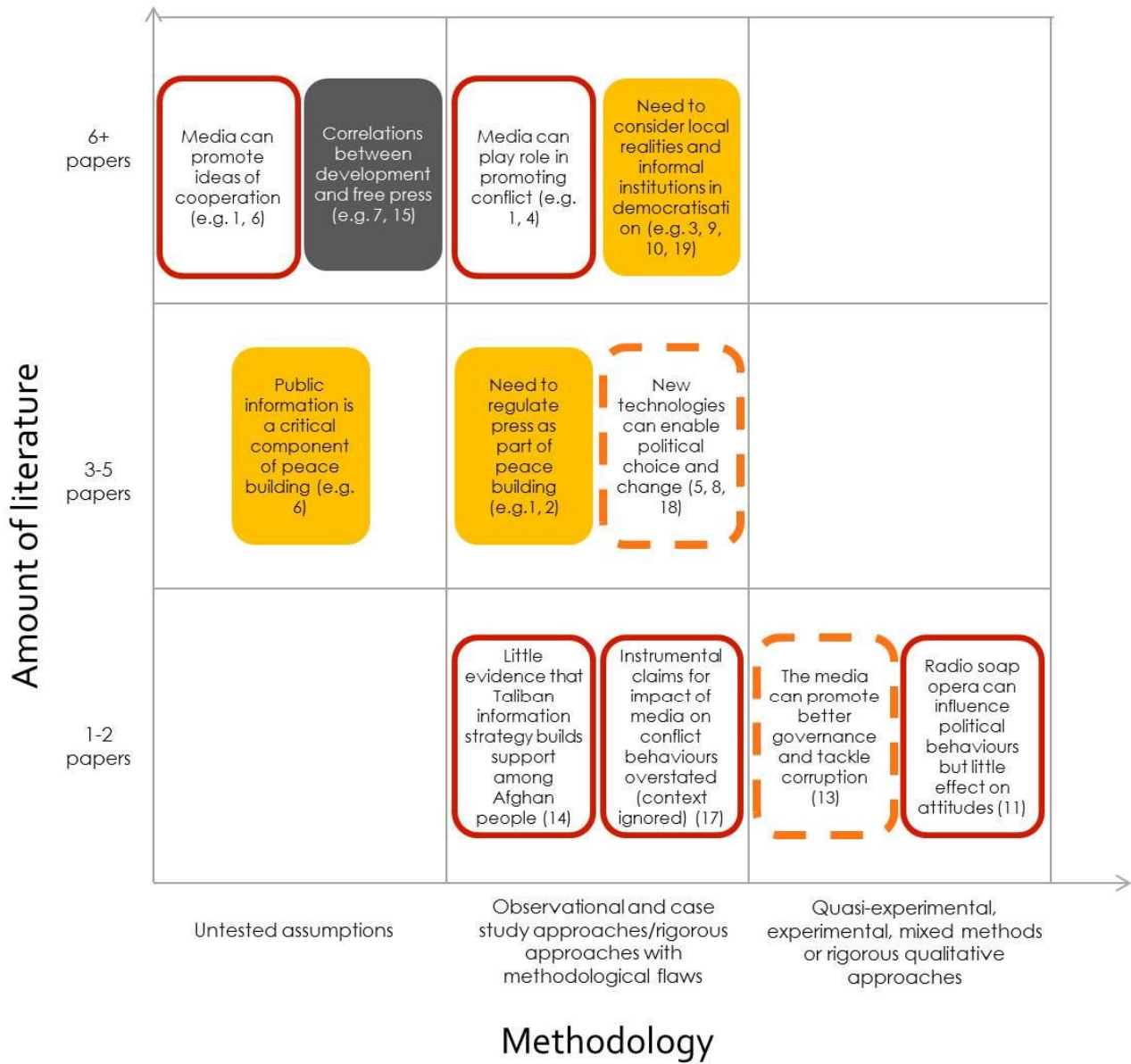
This figure summarises the quantity and methodologies of evidence for four key themes related to media and conflict

Outline of evidence

Can the media influence and promote peaceful or violent behaviours?

A great deal of literature takes the normative view that the media plays a role in promoting cooperation in post-conflict environments (e.g. 1, 6). However, the literature review only found one paper that had examined this assertion using rigorous methodologies (11).

The claims that the media can play a role in promoting conflict are backed up by rather more evidence, mainly based on case studies (e.g. 1, 4). However this evidence was critiqued by one paper (17), which suggests that the role of the media in promoting conflict in Rwanda has been overstated. One MSc dissertation concludes that the Taliban have been rather unsuccessful in promoting conflict via the media in Afghanistan (14).

Is there a correlation between free press and economic development?

The evidence review found repeated normative claims that a free press enhances development (e.g. 7, 15); however it revealed no good evidence to confirm or refute this.

Does public information/free press promote peace and democracy?

Much of the literature in this field takes the normative view that public information and a free press promotes peace and democracy. Several studies highlighted the need to consider local realities and informal institutions in post-conflict democratisation (e.g. 3, 9, 10, 19). For example, one study (9) suggested that post-conflict interventions in some African countries would need to influence debates that happen in traditional public arenas such as the marketplace. Conversely, two papers used case study evidence to argue that press regulation may be necessary to promote peace (1, 2).

Can media and technology promote good governance and act as a liberating force?

A number of papers, with varying degrees of methodological rigour, describe how media and technology can provide new avenues for political choice and change (e.g. 5, 8, 18). However, others have cautioned that attributing change largely to media and information is over-simplistic (20).

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