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The Role of Media Literacy in the Governance Reform Agenda

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Introduction

A fundamental principle of the governance reform agenda is to build more effective and responsive states accountable to their citizens; free, plural, and independent media systems can play a crucial role in this process.¹ As stated by Collier,² free and active media inform and organize society around issues imperative for effective democratic processes to work. In effect, today's convergence of traditional and new media offers promising opportunities for inclusion, participation, and transparency; which are, however, paralleled by challenges such as uneven access, misinformation, and exposure to harmful content. Consequently, access to accurate and objective information is more important than ever for a healthy democracy to flourish. This access is crucial to improve conditions for trust among citizens, media, and state, and to implement and sustain the governance agenda.

To navigate a complex and an ever-evolving media landscape, citizens must obtain the critical abilities and necessary communicative skills to participate actively and meaningfully in a democratic public sphere—the space where free and equal citizens come together to discuss and debate current affairs. Fueled by media literacy, this informed discussion in the public sphere can engage citizens as active stakeholders in governance reforms. This paper argues that media literacy, therefore, plays a crucial role in the governance reform agenda. To assist development practitioners, the paper also makes recommendations for steps to improve governance through media literacy.

What is Media Literacy?

While there is no universally agreed upon definition, media literacy is most commonly defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media content.³ Access is defined as both physical access and the ability to use different forms of media, while analysis and evaluation entail “the ability to seek, locate, and select information to suit the individual needs,” and “to evaluate the information according

to parameters, such as truthfulness, honesty, interests of the broadcaster, etc.” Creating media is the production and distribution of media content, also referred to as communicative competence.⁴

Why Media Literacy is Important

The skills acquired through media literacy include critical thinking, problem solving, personal autonomy, and social and communicative skills.⁵ These are all skills crucial for building an informed and active citizenry. In fact, research on media literacy in Western societies suggests that “an individual who has knowledge of the media will more easily acquire a well-founded opinion on societal issues/events and, thereby, will be better equipped to express his/her opinion, individually as well as collectively, in public and other social contexts.”⁶ Furthermore, many proponents see media literacy as a contributing factor to “participation, active citizenship, competence development and lifelong learning.”⁷ While media literacy is deemed crucial for the development and sustainability of a healthy democratic public sphere, it is often forgotten as a precondition when discussing democracy and development.⁸

Living in a digital era, it is important to stress that media literacy involves all media, including traditional means, such as television, radio, film, music, and print.⁹ On a daily basis, we are surrounded by messages pushed from one or several mediums that shape our opinions and knowledge about public affairs and the world we live in. As discussed by Jenkins,¹⁰ we live in a convergence culture “where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.” Today, we witness a fast global progression of popular social networking tools, promoting user-generated content, including uploading videos; blogging about interests and current affairs; and engaging in citizen journalism, online discussions, and collaborative projects.

Literacies for Active Citizenship

While these new technologies promote participation, plurality, and diversity of opinions, they also contribute to a stream of new challenges, such as unfiltered information, misinformation, copyright issues, and users engaging in unhealthy habits. Consequently, there is an urgency to instill media literacy in citizens to become critical consumers of information and to contribute to public discourse effectively. In developing media skills, citizens can protect themselves and others from harmful content pushed mainly by new information and communication technologies.

While new forms of literacies emerge as part of this new media landscape, they are not necessarily recognized and promoted as essential to thrive in a knowledge-based society. Horton¹¹ discusses six different categories of what he calls the “21st century survival literacies:” basic literacy skills, computer literacy, media literacy, distance education and e-learning, cultural literacy, and information literacy. As traditional and new media converge, however, the distinction between these literacies is no longer clear-cut. For example, media literacy is often confused with information literacy and at times even used interchangeably. Carlsson¹² explains that while information literacy focuses on technical skills to develop and distribute media, media literacy centers on citizen and cultural expression. Yet because of the growing media convergence, she points out that both literacies connect to issues of democracy and active citizenship and, therefore, should be merged to promote the role of citizenship and active participation more effectively.

Firestone¹³ also discusses crucial literacies in today’s society—such as media literacy, civic literacy, and news literacy—which he refers to as a “bundle of literacies.” He addresses how these should be tied to the responsibility of citizenship, pointing out rightly, “We should have a right to be informed, but also a responsibility to become informed.” He continues, “If we want to preserve a healthy democracy and society for future generations, we need to instill these literacies in our young as they assume the mantle of their highest calling, citizenship.”

Media Literacy and Good Governance

Norris and Odugbemi¹⁴ have identified three ideal roles for the news media that can have a tremendous impact on good governance and accountability, if effectively fulfilled. As watchdogs, the news media protect public interests by monitoring society’s powerful sectors to uncover corruption and misinformation; as agenda-setters, media raise awareness of social issues and specifically major global crises that call for action; and finally as gatekeepers, they unite a plurality of perspectives and voices to debate issues of concern.

Due to weaknesses in the media systems, however, the news media face obstacles in fulfilling these roles. Norris & Odugbemi¹⁵ discuss several limitations, including: 1) state control of news media posing restrictions such as “. . . censorship, state ownership of the media, legal restrictions on freedom of expression and publication, criminal prosecution of journalists and even violence;” 2) commercial pressures limiting news media coverage of certain issues, such as corruption; 3) lack of journalistic standards that may contribute to political bias, sensationalism, etc.; 4) availability of a vibrant civil society performing the watchdog role; and 5) lack of media literacy and access to the news media and/or alternative news sources, all of which may threaten the development of a competent citizenry. These limitations prevent citizens from acquiring an adequate understanding of how current affairs affect their lives and, therefore, diminish their political authority.¹⁶

To overcome these weaknesses in media systems, a more coordinated and holistic approach to media development has been suggested, in which all factors crucial to achieving and sustaining free, plural, and independent media systems are given equal attention and weight.¹⁷ An important factor in this regard is the citizenry itself. Price and Krug¹⁸ point out that, “the character of the citizenry and *its capacity to use such elements of the press that are available*” are essential in supporting a free and independent media. They further imply that laws underpinning

free and independent media will not work unless the citizenry understands and appreciates the value of the media, as well as the value of freedom of expression and freedom of information.

Even in an ideal media environment, however, the news media may still distort. In addition, increased transparency may create a flood of new information that has little meaning unless it is sorted and assessed.¹⁹ To build an informed and active citizenry, therefore, citizens ought to have a sound understanding of the news media to challenge faulty media structures, as well as to acquire skills to sort information for reliability and accuracy. Additionally, Price and Krug²⁰ suggest that a special kind of literacy might be required that “. . . encompasses a desire to acquire, interpret, and apply information as part of civil society.”

Opportunities of New Media

Media literacy can strengthen the public interest to improve socio-political conditions, enable citizens to participate actively in public discussions and deliberations to affect change, and empower citizens to fulfill their rights and obligations. It also contributes to the governance reform agenda by identifying corruption and demanding transparency and accountability. For example, citizens are taking on an increased role as watchdogs through citizen journalism and blogging. Even in state-controlled environments, such as in Vietnam, citizens are turning away from the state media and starting to embrace bloggers for information about political affairs. According to a recent article,²¹ bloggers in Vietnam have been quite active in discussing government activities such as corruption, especially after a few journalists were arrested in 2008 for uncovering a government corruption case. The Ministry of Information and Communication appears to be losing patience with free speech bloggers and may put restrictions on

what can be discussed in the blogosphere. Vietnamese bloggers, however, think it might be too late due to the government's lack of technology and manpower to control the blogosphere.

Similarly, Iranian bloggers are testing their government's limits, as attested in a recent study conducted by the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School.²² The study concludes that many Iranian bloggers are challenging their government, as they have more freedom to express their views than the news media. Since opposition is not permitted, many blogs are blocked; however, the government's technical capacity again seems limited.

These examples showcase a growing public thirst for information and freedom to discuss current affairs, as well as the potential new media, such as blogs, have in raising issues of public concern, questioning government action, and bringing different perspectives out in the open. Hence, citizens have the ability to contribute to the public agenda by motivating the news media to cover issues that are important to their daily lives.

Citizen bloggers also play a vital role in breaking news stories. In crises, such as the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, the news media relied on local bloggers to provide information on events happening on the ground. CNN's iReport, for example, is set up to let citizens upload videos and photos of events that could be news stories or could strengthen current stories. As such, the news media is embracing citizen news reporting as a means of getting prompt information to viewers/readers, which could potentially contribute to accuracy and transparency in the media, or have an opposite effect.

As citizen engagement increases through new technology, the challenge of uneven access to technology persists around the globe. This is an

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ongoing socio-economic issue, even as access to new technologies expands. Even in developing countries, citizens' acceptance of new forms of gathering information, such as mobile technology, blogs, and social networking sites, is increasing. Nonetheless, physical access is only one aspect of technology adoption; perhaps more important is access to quality content and ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply it. There has been a tendency, especially in development, to think about building and spreading technical skills to develop and distribute content, rather than focusing on these other crucial aspects of media literacy.

While much of the discussion thus far has focused on media literacy and new media, traditional media are by no means overlooked. Media literacy is equally important when it comes to familiar mediums, such as newspapers, television, radio, etc. Nevertheless, the discussion of media literacy is more eminent due to the fast speed and wide spread of information via new media. Olson²³ points out that today, internet safety is a major issue driving the development of media literacy programs around the globe. No matter which medium is used, however, citizens ought to have the appropriate skills to determine the credibility of news sources and to understand the news media's function and responsibilities. Without these skills, the cycle of misinformation and harmful content may well continue to, as O'Neil²⁴ puts it, "poison public discourse," and consequently hinder the prosperity of the democratic public sphere.

Current Thinking and Practices in Media Literacy

When the Grunwald Declaration on Media Education was unanimously agreed upon by 19 nations at UNESCO's International Symposium on Media Education in 1982, the following statement was made: *"Rather than condemn or endorse the undoubted power of the media, we need to accept their significant impact and penetration throughout the world as an established fact, and also appreciate their importance as an element of culture in today's*

*world. The role of communication and media in the process of development should not be underestimated, nor the function of media as instruments for the citizen's active participation in society. Political and educational systems need to recognize their obligations to promote in their citizens a critical understanding of the phenomena of communication."*²⁵

The declaration was established to fully support the development and integration of comprehensive media education programs. Some 26 years later, however, media education is still not accepted as global subject matter.²⁶ Therefore, reports of major challenges to media education like overcrowded curriculums and lack of resources to train teachers are not surprising.²⁷ Even in the development community, media literacy is just recently gaining popularity and integration in a few media development programs. Bevort, Frau-Meigs, Jacquinet-Delaunay and Souyri²⁸ suggest that challenges to media education are structural, intellectual, and cultural in nature—much due to lack of coordination and priorities from governing bodies. From a pedagogical standpoint, they argue media education lacks a general conceptual framework and theoretical models. Another challenge is attitudes of teachers themselves who may have a limited understanding of the importance of media education or are simply hesitant to promote media culture.

Yet, the overall view is that the education system is not up to speed with a changing society in which it is essential to adapt to different socio-political environments and to do more than transfer models established in developed countries to everywhere else.²⁹ Still, Bevort et al., suggest that challenges to media education may be justified by its short history and because the importance of the Grunwald Declaration has not been embraced fully.

Advocating for Media Literacy

UNESCO and the European Union have been major advocates for media education and have co-organized several international conferences in 2007, bringing together media practitioners, decision-makers and authorities from all over the world.

They discussed progress since the Grunwald Declaration and shared good practices and challenges in different contexts. Based on these discussions, 12 recommendations were established within the following four Grunwald guidelines that are still valid: 1) *development of comprehensive media education programs at all education levels*; 2) *teacher training and awareness raising of the other stakeholders in the social sphere*; 3) *research and its dissemination networks*; and 4) *international cooperation in actions*.³⁰

Several of their recommendations are useful for the purpose of this paper, such as the importance of mobilizing stakeholders other than schools in the public sphere and of instilling media literacy skills in all citizens, at all levels. The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)³¹ even suggests that government officials could benefit from media literacy due to their frequent unwillingness to engage and lack of training to work effectively with the news media. Since media literacy is multi-layered with close ties to rights such as freedom of information and expression, the responsibility to instill skills ought to extend beyond the educational context and involve other stakeholders. As the Grunwald Declaration rightly states, media education is not only an obligation of the political system but also in its interest.

While little progress has been made on a large scale, today, there is an increasing number of civil society organizations, associations, and regulatory authorities engaged in promoting media literacy. For example as part of the Communications Act of 2003 Ofcom, an independent British broadcast regulator, is active in building public awareness of media literacy to promote the interests of all citizens and to protect them from harm.³² There are additional examples of media organizations active in promoting media literacy, such as the World Association of

Newspapers' introductory school program developed to instill democratic values and active citizenship.³³

News ombudsmen can also play a crucial role in promoting media literacy. As defined by the Organization of News Ombudsmen,³⁴ a news ombudsman works as an internal investigator to monitor "accuracy, fairness and balance" in the media, and serves as an intermediary between citizens and the news agency. An ombudsman can educate citizens about media practices and help build trust between citizens and the media. Associations are important in this regard as well. They have the ability to mobilize other actors and thus have a better chance to influence political decisions.³⁵ For such associations to be effective, Joseph³⁶ suggests, they should

be independent and have limited involvement with either the state or market—a challenge depending on who provides the funding.

In recent years, media watchdog groups and media monitoring projects have encouraged the news media to perform their role as the "true watchdogs of society" by monitoring news coverage and advocating news media that are responsive and responsible to citizens.³⁷ For

example since 1992, the Media Monitoring Project of South Africa has tracked coverage of human rights issues, using the results for advocacy and capacity building to influence media policy.³⁸ They suggest that media monitoring empowers civil society as it helps develop critical media literacy skills, promotes active citizenship, and encourages accountability in the media.

Global Collaboration on Good Practice

While there is an increased number of organizations and global initiatives focusing on media literacy, further research is crucial to heighten awareness of the Grunwald Declaration and, as in the case

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of this paper, to demonstrate how media literacy can contribute to good governance. UNESCO specifically suggests that “research is needed to understand the sustainability of emerging forms of participation by civil society and the extent to which new communication and information environments can contribute to democratic participation, e.g., Facebook, Myspace, etc.”³⁹ Moving forward, UNESCO and the EU recommend developing different directions for research to assess the impact of media education and to use an interdisciplinary approach as media literacy touches on many subjects, such as human rights, citizenship, and sustainable development.

UNESCO and the EU further recommend continuing to share good practices, to face global challenges cooperatively, and to promote collaborative projects. To this end, several clearinghouses on media literacy have emerged in recent years to share research, good practices, and resources among others. For example, the UN-Alliance of Civilizations Media Literacy Education Clearinghouse is a global repository, focusing on Media Literacy Education, Media Education Policy, and Youth Media.⁴⁰ Nordicom and UNESCO have also established a clearinghouse to collect research on youth and media with the goal of broadening knowledge and increasing awareness about media literacy.⁴¹ UNESCO and the EU also emphasize the importance of continuing to raise awareness and to mobilize all stakeholders involved, including high-level political decision makers for maximum impact. They specifically suggest collaborating with other international or national organizations on launching initiatives, such as public awareness campaigns on media literacy, and organizing international meetings with key decision makers to strengthen support of media education.

In sum, there are a number of organizations and initiatives engaged in media literacy, but efforts are sporadic and have not gained enough global attention. Today, however, there is an increased focus on curriculum development to integrate media literacy as part of citizenship skills, as well as on

sharing global research and good practice through clearinghouses and seminars. The findings are conclusive: heightened awareness of media literacy is crucial in the development process. Media literacy deserves priority and acceptance as a critical component for a healthy democratic public sphere. Hence, creating a strong mandate through a multi-stakeholder approach is necessary to affect policy change and to extend research programs, demonstrating clearly the linkages among media literacy, citizen action, and good governance. In the development field, innovative approaches beyond the educational context should be pursued to extend media literacy skills to all citizens, at all levels.

Recommendations

The goal of the following recommendations is to strengthen the public sphere by developing critical media literacy skills of citizens. These skills help create an active citizenry empowered to make informed opinions, engage in public debate, and contribute to the governance reform agenda by demanding good governance and accountability.

a) Support Media Watchdog Groups/Media Observatories

Media monitoring is an effective tool to instill media literacy, transforming civil society and the public from passive receivers to activists and encouraging accountability in the media. Citizens who are aware of what makes news and how the media covers issues will become more critical consumers of information and more inclined to demand accuracy and transparency.

Possible Action Steps

- Promote media monitoring projects and networks to the larger development community.
- Encourage monitoring and steer the focus toward issues on the governance reform agenda.
- Publish and promote media monitoring results to increase awareness and educate citizens about current media processes and practices.

b) Promote the Role of News Ombudsmen

A news ombudsman serves as a news agency's internal watchdog, playing a critical role in strengthening reporting and media practices by monitoring accuracy and balance in news stories. Serving as an intermediary between citizens and the news agency, the news ombudsman handles complaints from readers and helps the news agency become more accountable and accessible to readers.⁴²

Possible Action Steps

- Build awareness about the role of news ombudsmen and how they can help strengthen accountability.
- Encourage citizens to utilize the news ombudsmen function by actively providing feedback.
- Encourage and support forums for the news ombudsmen to educate citizens about media practices.

c) Build Media Literacy Skills through Mobilization, Public Forums, and Debate⁴³

Beyond the education context, create and promote interactive spaces for citizens and other stakeholders to freely discuss and debate current affairs, media practices, and citizen rights and obligations. This interaction will educate citizens; spread awareness about ideal media roles; build support for free, plural, and independent media systems; and promote a culture conducive to openness and inquiry.

Possible Action Steps

- Promote public forums to encourage dialogue among different actors, including regulatory authorities, associations, educators, citizens, and media professionals.
- Encourage other actors in the public sphere, such as regulatory authorities and associations, to heighten public awareness about media literacy, laws, and regulations.
- Involve citizens in discussions about codes of conduct to raise awareness and to ensure that codes are followed.
- Build capacity of civil society organizations on media literacy.

- Encourage joint citizen/media projects, such as investigating reporting.
- Publish forum discussions and make them accessible to the public.

d) Promote Media Literacy as an Essential Element in Media Development Programs

Media literacy encourages citizens to exercise their rights to information and freedom of expression. To support fully the development and sustainability of free, plural, and independent media, citizens ought to be aware of its benefits. Media literacy, however, has recently emerged as a focus in the development field and sporadic actions have been taken. As suggested by CIMA,⁴⁴ a more holistic approach needs to be considered with all factors given equal weight, including media literacy, for successful and sustainable outcomes.

Possible Action Steps

- Heighten awareness about the crucial role media literacy plays in development practice through seminars, knowledge products, and other collaborative efforts among development practitioners.
- Support activities to educate citizens about laws and benefits of a free, plural, and independent media system.
- Encourage knowledge sharing and cooperation among development practitioners on media literacy initiatives.

e) Support Research on Linkages among Media Literacy, Citizen Action, and Good Governance

To better understand the impact media literacy has on citizen action, participation, and good governance, empirical evidence is needed to gain support for policy development and advocacy measures, such as the action steps listed previously.

Possible Action Steps

- Support research activities, including workshops, to discuss and share good practice and identify knowledge gaps for further research.
- Encourage cooperation between academia and development practitioners to establish linkages

among media literacy, good governance, and citizen activism.

- Support activities to measure impact of current media literacy initiatives in media development projects.

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CommGAP

Towards A New Agora

The Agora was the heart of the ancient Greek city—its main political, civic, religious and commercial center. Today, the Agora is the space where free and equal citizens discuss, debate, and share information about public affairs in order to influence the policies that affect the quality of their lives. The democratic public sphere that the ancient Agora represents is an essential element of good governance and accountability.

Using innovative communication approaches and techniques to strengthen the public sphere—by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens—CommGAP applies the power of communication to promote good and accountable governance and better development results.



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