The role of independent media in curbing corruption in fragile settings

James Deane

Sign up for our newsletter: www.bbcmediaaction.org
THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN CURBING CORRUPTION IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

Contents

Executive summary 3

Part 1 The effectiveness of media in checking corruption 5

Part 2 Independent media in peril 7

Part 3 Existing development support for independent media 9

Part 4 Effective media support strategies in fragile states 11

Part 5 Conclusion 15

Endnotes 17

Front cover Town Hall debate, Abuja, Nigeria. Public meetings where people can challenge public officials can support a culture of accountability. This debate was recorded as part of Talk Your Own – Make Nigeria Better, broadcast with 150 radio partners to almost 20 million people. It is one of several BBC Media Action-supported programmes designed to improve accountability and defuse conflict in the country.

BBC MEDIA ACTION
Executive summary

Evidence is growing that an independent media remains one of society’s most effective assets available to curb corruption and to foster accountability. Evidence is also growing that, especially in fragile states, independent media is increasingly imperilled, threatened by political co-option from factional interests, legal and regulatory restrictions and weak economic foundations.

This briefing argues that international support for free and independent media capable of curbing corruption may, therefore, be increasingly important, but that current support strategies are both partial and fragmented. Accordingly, effective media support strategies will require more than an increase in financial contributions. They will require the development of more coherent, context-specific and evidence-based plans rooted in learning from what works and what does not.

This briefing has been written principally for decision-makers in donor and other development support organisations who are concerned about the development costs of corruption and who do not currently prioritise support to independent media.

Part 1 provides a brief summary of the evidence base supporting the media’s role in tackling corruption. While the evidence is complex, this section concludes that the capacity of the media to hold power – including corrupt power – to account is at least as substantial as many other anti-corruption arenas, and often more so.

Part 2 describes the increasing economic and political challenges facing the media in fragile states and argues that the media is losing its capacity to act as a check on corruption and to foster accountability. It argues that as the resources available to support media independence and to uphold media’s capacity to serve publics remain low, many of those who do not want to be held to account are investing heavily in order to control or intimidate independent media. Corruption and other negative impacts arising from corruption – such as increased radicalisation as a result of public disenchantment – are likely to increase as a result.

Part 3 argues that, while there have been notable major investments in local and national media from a small number of donors and development actors, the development system as a whole has weak capacity and a poor record in supporting this area. Without action, the incentive systems that shape development priorities make it inevitable that such support will continue to be marginal.

Part 4 looks at ways of supporting media that is capable of tackling corruption, including through online platforms, investigative journalist networks and other media support approaches. It argues that successful media support strategies will need to use a range of approaches and a mix of digital and analogue media platforms, grounded in strong contextual analysis and research. Many initiatives – especially investigative journalism networks – are generating great impact, but they do not provide a panacea in fragile and closed settings where such efforts are especially vulnerable to co-option and intimidation. International support to protect media freedom, including the safety of journalists, is becoming increasingly important. Drawing on the work of BBC Media Action, this section also argues that, especially in fragile states, important progress can be achieved by influencing social norms to foster a culture of accountability.

Part 5 provides some policy conclusions. It argues that in light of the role that media can play in reducing corruption, support to independent media should feature as a more prominent component of anti-corruption and accountability support strategies. Increasing financial support needs to be complemented with efforts at lesson learning to ensure that such support is effective. Successful strategies will need to be context-specific, evidence-based, underpinned by clear theories of change and address both political and social aspects of corruption.
THE ROLE OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN CURBING CORRUPTION IN FRAGILE SETTINGS

Definitions

Media

In this paper "media" generally refers to all forms of digital or analogue communication through which people access information, except interpersonal communication. This paper particularly focuses on:

• Independent journalism
• Independent platforms for public debate and discussion, drama or other content
• Media entities or initiatives that act as a check on executive power or shape social norms in ways that increase accountability

"Independent media" refers to commercial, public service or community media that works largely in the public interest and is reasonably free of influence from government, political, commercial, factional or other interests.

This paper does not focus on online advocacy or civil society platforms and initiatives, except in relation to partnerships between such initiatives and the media.

Corruption

Any definition of corruption is problematic. For reasons of concision, this paper has not sought to break down the diverse relationships between the many different forms of media and corruption. Corruption takes multiple forms in multiple contexts, ranging from high-value theft to small-scale bribery, and from international money laundering to local abuse of office.

While acknowledging these complexities, this paper starts with Transparency International's definitions:

• Corruption: "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain", covering everything from petty corruption to grand larceny
• Grand corruption: "acts committed at a high level of government that distort policies or the central functioning of the state, enabling leaders to benefit at the expense of the public good"
• Petty corruption: "everyday abuse of entrusted power by low- and mid-level public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens, who often are trying to access basic goods or services in places like hospitals, schools, police departments and other agencies"

Accountability

"Accountability" is a means through which those with power, including those who are corrupt, are held responsible for their actions. BBC Media Action's full definition is "the extent to which people, groups and institutions are able to hold government and other power holders responsible for their actions, and the extent to which government and other power holders provide a public account of their decisions and actions."

The term implies both:

• A political dimension, such as the influence, reputation and independence required by the media to hold executive power to account
• A social dimension, such as the capacity of the media to inform an active and attentive citizenry capable of holding government to account, or influence social norms and public tolerance – or intolerance – of corruption or abuse of power

Fragile state or setting

"Fragile states" are countries where government and governance is weak, where the rule of law does not run across the country and where there is tension and conflict in society. According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), "a fragile region or state has weak capacity to carry out basic governance functions, and lacks the ability to develop mutually constructive relations with society. Fragile states are also more vulnerable to internal or external shocks such as economic crises or natural disasters."

BBC Media Action's work often focuses on fragile states and settings where the existence of different politics, religions or ethnicities makes relationships between communities especially difficult, and where the building of a shared identity can be especially challenging.
The evidence supporting the role of media in acting as a check on corruption is long-standing and substantial. Recent evidence reviews appear to suggest that a venerable pillar of democratic theory – that a free press is essential to checking abuse of executive power – continues to be borne out. They also suggest that independent media continue to be at least as relevant to curbing corruption as many of the anti-corruption initiatives different development actors have supported in recent years. But the evidence is not always entirely conclusive regarding how and why media has that effect.

A review of the evidence commissioned by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in 2015 concluded that “direct anti-corruption interventions, which were especially prominent during the 1990s and 2000s, including efforts such as anti-corruption authorities, national anti-corruption strategies, and national anti-corruption legislation... were found to be ineffective in combating corruption”.3

In contrast, the DFID-commissioned review found that a free media has a clear effect in reducing corruption, alongside measures such as improving procurement. It observed: “There is a small body of evidence relying primarily on observational studies making use of statistical analyses. This evidence consistently indicates [that] freedom of the press can reduce corruption and that the media plays a role in the effectiveness of other social accountability mechanisms”.4 The same paper concluded that when media freedom is curtailed, corruption tends to rise, finding evidence of “restrictions to press freedom leading to higher levels of corruption in a sample of 51 developed and developing countries”.

Above: Tanzanian newspapers carry headlines of an alleged corruption scandal in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in November 2014, which prompted many donors to suspend aid to the country. Evidence consistently shows that a free and independent media is associated with reduced levels of corruption, and imposing controls on the media is associated with increased corruption.
Other reviews reinforce the media’s impact on reducing corruption more emphatically. In 2015, Mungiu-Pippidi published the results of a major analysis of the data available on corruption. This study found, in common with the DFID-commissioned review, that many strategies deployed by development actors to combat corruption over recent years have proved of limited effect. The role of a free media, however, had among the greatest effects in limiting corruption (alongside other actors, such as civil society). Mungiu-Pippidi concluded: “We found evidence that a society can constrain those who have better opportunities to spoil public resources if free media, civil society, and critical citizens are strong enough.”

While there are plenty of other studies (mostly from non-fragile state contexts) that suggest a clear and direct link between the role of an independent media and reduced corruption, not all of the evidence is clear-cut. Some studies suggest that this link is often dependent on other factors, such as the presence of an active and effective civil society. Others focus more heavily on the role of such actors, but argue that civil society and other efforts at holding government to account are dependent on the role of the media.

Although there is little literature suggesting that a free and independent media is not a relevant factor in reducing corruption, questions continue to be raised about the direction of this relationship. A World Bank 2016 report, Making Politics work for Development, correlated data between Freedom House’s media freedom data from 2000–2013 with Polity IV data on corruption and concluded that, although there is a positive association between media freedom and the control of corruption, “such correlations are difficult to interpret and could reflect a direction of causation from better governance to better functioning media markets.”

There is also uncertainty about how and why an independent media is effective at reducing corruption. The media can investigate and report wrongdoing by governments and others, bring about changes in voting behaviour, help to discipline corrupt governments or shape political and social norms in ways that discourage corruption. It can encourage (or discourage) greater political participation, increase (or decrease) political knowledge and transparency, and improve (or distort) the accuracy of information available to citizens. Media’s ability to influence these depends on the effectiveness of the media platform (print, radio, TV or online, for instance) in any given situation as well as that of the specific output – whether it be news reporting, public debates, drama or magazine formats.

While the evidence presented here and elsewhere that independent media has an effect on corruption is strong, drawing blanket conclusions on what has most effect in any one type of context, particularly given the political complexity and diversity of fragile states, is impossible. A review by the World Bank on the evidence around the political impact of transparency efforts (much of it focused on the role of the media) concluded that “information from trustworthy sources can increase political participation and allow voters to punish badly-performing politicians at the polls, [but] more research is necessary to develop an understanding of both the long-term effects of information provision as well as the general equilibrium effects taking into account public officials’, politicians’, and parties’ responses.”

While this brief overview does not pretend to constitute a comprehensive evidence review, there is sufficient evidence, both historically and more recently, to suggest a continuing, and arguably increasing, role of the media in curbing corruption. The next section argues that independent media is increasingly imperilled – often precisely because it presents such a check on corrupt power.
Independent media in peril

A combination of political, legal and economic forces seem to be increasingly undermining media’s capacity to sustain its independence and play its accountability role.

Independent media is, according to most internationally accepted indicators, in growing crisis. “Press freedom declined to its lowest point in 12 years in 2015”, according to Freedom House’s 2016 Freedom of the Press report, which it attributed to political, criminal and terrorist forces seeking to “co-opt or silence the media in their broader struggle for power”. This report estimated that only 13% of the world’s population enjoys a free press.14

Behind such conclusions lie often-complex threats to journalists, some of which constitute overt intimidation and others that are more insidious. Analysis by BBC Media Action of media landscapes in fragile states,15 such as Afghanistan,16 Iraq,17 Somalia,18 Kenya,19 Pakistan,20 countries that experienced the Arab uprisings21 and elsewhere, suggest that organisations that want to avoid being held to account have invested heavily in ensuring that traditional and online media are not impartial and instead reflect and protect their interests.

Media co-option ranges from that common in many societies – such as the heavy influence exerted by companies, political parties and governments – through to outright takeover of the media by specific interests. In some of these aforementioned states, commentators have pointed to the emergence of “ethno-sectarian” media empires, and what are described in Afghanistan as “warlord” media.22 The picture across these states is complex and far from uniform, but there appears to be growing evidence that, in fragile states, the propensity of media to become co-opted – and sometimes corrupted – is increasing.

Such co-option takes many forms, not all as visible as violence or intimidation. Economic investments can take the form of government, factional or other actors supporting or creating their own media, subsidising it heavily and squeezing out independent media with less financial muscle. These actors can then exercise influence through a variety of means. They can extend their networks of patronage, such as through board membership on major media organisations. They can make corrupt payments to journalists or broadcasters for favourable media reporting (so-called “brown envelope” journalism). Or they can use their economic power to stifle dissenting media, such as refusing to take out advertising, the financial life-blood of many independent media organisations.

In addition to these political threats, press freedom is increasingly threatened by the introduction of new laws hampering the capacity of media organisations to act independently. Thomas Carothers and his colleagues at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have documented the increasing restrictions placed on democratic actors, including media, around the world, often with the justification of increasing stability or countering terrorism. “More than 140 governments have passed new counter-terrorism legislation since September 11, 2001,” they argued.23 “In many cases these measures fail to provide precise definitions of the types of acts and organisations they are meant to target, instead referencing ambiguous concepts such as ‘public order’ and ‘public safety’ that can easily be abused to restrict the freedom of association and freedom of speech of all civil society organisations.”24 Ironically, while designed to enhance security, such measures may ultimately prove counter-productive. Given growing international recognition of corruption as a principal driver of radicalisation and instability, closing down one of the few mechanisms proven to deter corruption risks fuelling, rather than inhibiting, radicalisation.25

Editorial independence is further threatened by the weakening economic base of media organisations. In fragile states with already weak advertising markets, media independence is generally far more at risk because markets work according to political, rather than economic, incentives.26 A 2012 report by BBC Media Action on the media in Afghanistan concluded that around a third of media income came from advertising revenue, with the rest coming from donors and political, commercial, government and other subsidies.27
report argued that such a weak income base made media especially vulnerable to co-option, including by violent actors. Experience elsewhere suggests this is not atypical.28 Indeed, even in countries with advanced and sophisticated advertising markets, the internet is drawing advertising income away from independent media organisations.

Many expert commentators are concluding that, even in advanced economies, independent, impartial journalism and a free press will only survive in the future through some form of subsidy. “Good journalism has always been subsidized [and] markets have never supplied as much news as democracy demands,” argued a landmark 2013 report from the Tow Center for Digital Journalism.29 The report maintained that in the digital age, where the “internet wrecks advertising subsidy,” new models of subsidising independent journalism and media will be necessary. A report from the London School of Economics concurred, concluding that, given the context of the shifts of advertising away from supporting independent media, “to safeguard pluralism and editorial competition, alternative funding sources should be considered. Policymakers can support private media organisations with mechanisms such as tax relief or even direct subsidies to specific media companies. Such support need not compromise media independence if safeguards such as statutory eligibility criteria are in place.”30

Most media support strategies include a substantial focus on improving business models and financial sustainability for independent media. But such strategies can only achieve so much. In already weak commercial climates with growing political co-option of media, and the destabilisation of traditional media business models as internet penetration increases, the prospects for the financial sustainability and independence of media in fragile states is becoming more, rather than less, precarious.

Right An Iraqi woman holds a placard during a demonstration against corruption and poor services in Karbala, Iraq in 2015. The writing in Arabic reads: “No to the theft of people’s money.” The failure to address legitimate and popular anger at corruption is increasingly recognised as driving radicalisation in some fragile states.
PART 3

Existing development support for independent media

The first part of this report presented evidence of the links between an independent media and corruption. The second part concluded that a combination of political, economic as well as technological factors was making the survival of independent media increasingly difficult. This section assesses what the international development community is currently doing to support independent media.

There are two ways of gauging support to a particular sector. The first is the financial resources provided to it. The second is the degree of strategic attention paid to it.

The OECD and US National Endowment for Democracy (NED) worked together in 2015 to calculate the amount of funding allocated to media support by OECD donors. That report concluded “there is still much work to be done with respect to boosting support for independent media, which occupies a still-miniscule fraction of donor attention and funding.” It calculated that in 2012 (the most recent date for which all the relevant data was available), just over $17 billion was allocated by bilateral and multilateral agencies to support “governance and peace in developing countries”. Support to the media and the free flow of information represented less than 2% of this amount.

The simple problem of funding is obviously one challenge for the media’s future in fragile states. Another is the effectiveness of support for media. Very few donor coordination mechanisms at country level are designed to improve strategic or coherent support for independent media. Outside of UNESCO, which has a limited country presence, no UN or other international organisation, nor any donor, is routinely tasked with understanding or providing a point of coordination for support to independent media.

The incentives that drive development priorities at country level also tend to impede such support. Most official development funding in recent years, including that allocated to fragile states, has been governed by aid effectiveness agreements that prioritise sensible principles such as “country ownership” (whereby country governments determine their priorities and donor governments try to support those priorities) and “mutual accountability” (principally focused on the relationship between donor and aid recipient governments). Aid priorities have mostly been shaped by demand identified by partner governments, but these tend not to ask for support to free and independent media.

This may be changing, signalled most clearly by the agreement of a “governance goal” in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which prioritises ensuring “public access to information and protect[ing] fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements”. Recommended measurement of this target includes explicit mention of tracking attacks on journalists. It remains to be seen whether this will translate into the kind of strategic support strategies that are required to support a 21st-century media capable of checking corruption.

Several private foundations – such as the Open Society Foundation – prioritise support to independent media. But as the need increases, such resources are increasingly stretched. Links between private foundations and the bilateral and multilateral development system are also sparse in this area. According to the OECD/NED report, “there is no major evidence of collaborative work or coordination among foundations and development agencies in this area.” Across the bilateral development system, there are very few head office posts that specialise in support to independent media. Such a lack of capacity means that generating priorities and strategies based on what works, and what does not work, in such a fast-moving environment becomes challenging. This problem is.

“Aid priorities have mostly been shaped by demand identified by partner governments but these tend not to ask for support to free and independent media.”
exacerbated by relatively scant research available to policy-makers to help guide effective spending on sustaining, or strengthening, independent media.

This does not mean that nothing is being done or accomplished. BBC Media Action, for example, is a beneficiary of major investments from many donors, especially from the UK government. The US, EU, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark have also been notable in their support to independent media and organisations that support it. However, this support is under intense pressure. Even in countries that have prioritised media support – such as Norway, which in 2016 published a new strategy to support independent media⁶ – resources are stretched as funding is focused on fresh issues such as the current refugee crisis.

In sum, corruption is on the rise. One of the most effective mechanisms to curb corruption is an independent free media. Support to independent media, both financially and economically, has been a low priority in recent years. The next section examines how some of these issues can be better addressed in the future, looking particularly at media support initiatives most likely to help curb corruption.
PART 4
Effective media support strategies in fragile states

Traditional support strategies for independent media – many of which are focused on building the capacity of media organisations to hold governments and other power holders to account – are broad-ranging. They include regulatory and legislative reform, supporting the plurality and sustainability of the media, building platforms for democratic public debate, strengthening media capacity and investing in infrastructure. Any strategy that tries to increase the capacity, independence, sustainability or performance of independent media is likely to contribute to improved accountability. But tying any one intervention, or set of interventions, specifically to systemic drops in corruption can be challenging. This makes it difficult to reach generic recommendations about which kinds of investment are likely to reap which kinds of return. This section looks at some of the areas that are currently attracting most attention in terms of reducing corruption.

Investigative journalism

The exposure of the assets managed by Mossack Fonseca – also called the “Panama Papers” – by the German newspaper *Suddeutsche Zeitung* with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) – was a dramatic testament to the media’s crucial role in effective governance in the 21st century. The ICIJ – which partners with mainstream media organisations – is dependent on philanthropic funding and was founded specifically because individual media organisations find it increasingly difficult to carry out such journalism alone. “We are losing our eyes and ears around the world precisely when we need them most,” the ICIJ website claims.

Such global initiatives have mushroomed in recent years. The Global Investigative Journalism Network boasts 138 member organisations in 62 countries. Several international organisations, such as the International Center for Journalism (ICFJ), are investing in important partnerships and mentoring programmes for investigative and data-driven journalism.

The extraordinary courage shown by investigative journalists is increasingly evidenced by both national and regional levels. The Ghanaian investigative journalist Anas Aremeyaw Anas has an astonishing record in exposing corruption and wrongdoing, perhaps most famously exposing bribe-taking by 12 high court judges, 22 lower court justices and 140 other court officials in his country. Many of those he has exposed have been suspended, fired or jailed, and Ghana’s 2012 Mental Health Act was largely a response to his investigation into living conditions in a mental asylum.

Collectives of investigative journalists are also prominent actors in exposing corruption. The Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting project brings together numerous regional investigative centres and independent media, from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. This project claims that its reports have led to more than $2.5 billion of assets being seized by law enforcement agencies and helped tax authorities find $600 million in hidden assets.

However, investigative journalism does not provide a panacea for deterring corruption in states where the rule of law is weak. Such investigations are immensely risky, even in countries with relatively free media and some form of rule of law. In Ghana, for example, Anas has received multiple threats and employs heavy security to protect his offices. A radio journalist in that same country was shot dead in September 2015 and, according to Freedom House, the Media Foundation for West Africa was sued by senior judges in connection with bribery exposés.

More than 20 years of data from the Committee on...
to Protect Journalists shows that almost as many journalists are killed covering crime and corruption – a common focus for investigative reporters – as are killed covering wars.\textsuperscript{44}

The internet has provided fresh opportunities for bloggers and citizen journalists to expose those who are abusing public office for private gain. But these individuals can be especially vulnerable to attack or intimidation and rarely have the same resources – whether it be legal advice, proper security, safety training or public profile – that a broadcast institution or newspaper might have at its disposal. The degree of training and skills required to carry out such journalism is also substantial and may not be available in countries with weak journalistic or legal cultures.\textsuperscript{45} Investigative journalism is often time-intensive and expensive, an additional challenge given the lack of business models available to support independent media, especially in fragile states. Such support must reflect an understanding of, and cater to the risks undertaken by, those it is designed to benefit.

Getting the digital/analogue mix right

The transformation in media landscapes has sparked a wave of innovation in recent years as publics, media organisations – and those who support them – search for more effective ways to improve accountability. The closing democratic space for traditional media described in this report has been at least partially compensated for by individuals and collectives using online platforms to investigate issues and share their findings. This has encompassed everything from technology-enabled social movements (such as those that led to the Arab uprisings) to a panoply of specific digital engagement initiatives.\textsuperscript{46} The field is vast, dynamic and diverse, and there is not room here to do justice to it.

Overall, however, the impact of solely digital initiatives on improving accountability is limited. “The internet was expected to usher in a new era of accountability and political empowerment, with citizens participating in policy-making and forming self-organised virtual communities to hold government to account”, argued the World Bank’s 2016 World Development Report, Digital Dividends. “These hopes have been largely unmet”, it concluded. The report acknowledged the impact of the internet on improving the efficiency of government functions, but concluded that it has had “limited impact on the most protracted problems – how to improve service provider accountability (principal-agent problems) and how to broaden public involvement and give greater voice to the poor (collective action problems).” The report based this assessment on a review of 17 digital engagement projects.

A review by a major multi-donor initiative focused on improving transparency and accountability, Making All Voices Count,\textsuperscript{47} reached a similar conclusion:
“Our review found no analysis so far of government responsiveness to citizen voices expressed via technologies, as distinct from the older channels such as the media, non-tech social accountability projects or social mobilisation.”

Fragile states are witnessing some of the most rapid increases in access to new technologies. But internet penetration remains low for the most part, and these states are also experiencing an explosion in the number of traditional, especially broadcast, media. Any media support strategy focused on curbing corruption and fostering accountability will need to get the digital/analogue mix right and tailor its approach to the context in which it is designed to operate. Working to support media in fragile states, BBC Media Action’s accountability-focused programming currently reaches more than 100 million people a year through multiple platforms (see box, p.14). BBC Media Action’s work includes a substantial emphasis on social and digital media, but the most effective way to engage large numbers of people in such settings often remains television and radio.

Creating a culture of accountability

Investigative and other forms of journalism, such as news and documentaries, provide just one societal asset capable of exposing corruption. The role of the media extends beyond journalism, however. The media – or at least media that has some public purpose – has immense influence and reach. While the role of the media in providing an institutional check on power is widely recognised, its role in influencing public attitudes may be just as important. Even in highly fragile settings, it may be possible to support the media in creating an improved culture of accountability by shifting social and political norms within the audience.

“The biggest impediments to anti-corruption efforts is the fact that corrupt practices have become so institutionalized in everyday society that citizens view them as fixed and incontestable,” stated a World Bank report on norms and corruption. The author examined a series of case studies where efforts had been made to shift such norms. She concluded: “To break down such an entrenched mind-set… citizens generally must believe that they can actually do something about corruption in order to summon the courage to act upon that belief.”

The role of the media as a shaper of social and political norms was clearly summarised in a paper prepared for the Partnership for Transparency Fund. “The fight against corruption needs to be fought on several fronts. Institutional reform – legislation and oversight – is one, but it will not be successful if it is not embedded in a broad change of culture,” argued Arnold and Lal, the authors. They asserted that “corrupt practices are often embedded in institutional practices and every-day lives and are perceived as fixed and incontestable…” The media – traditional mass media as well as new technologies – can play a vital role in unveiling corruption, framing corruption as a public problem, suggesting solutions, and generally empowering citizens to fight corruption.”

Indeed, it may be more feasible to play this role in settings where media freedoms are particularly constrained and where other media support strategies – aimed at governments, for example – are politically infeasible.” The potential of media and communication to shift social norms is well evidenced in other sectors such as health. In the governance sphere, this role extends beyond journalism to the role of drama, public debate and discussion-based media programmes that enable people to question both their leaders and their customs. See box, p.14 for more information on BBC Media Action’s work to improve a culture of accountability.
Corruption can be challenged in multiple ways. The media can provide an institutional check on the ability of the powerful to behave corruptly. However, corruption can also become a social norm, something that becomes largely accepted by most people in society as how things get done. A range of approaches can, when appropriate, be used to shift such norms and create a culture of accountability. This might be usefully described as both an expectation that those in authority should be held to account and a declining acceptance that bribe-taking is an acceptable practice, for example.

BBC Media Action’s work across 28 countries, principally in fragile settings, includes journalism training and partnering with independent media. But it also focuses significantly on developing fair, open and inclusive debate on TV and radio, asking questions of leaders and creating a culture and expectation of accountability. This work is designed to empower people by providing trusted, accurate and balanced information, stimulating discussion and challenging restrictive norms. While not focused explicitly on exposing corruption, it creates space for discussion that aims to engage all in society. Our programmes influence power: they expose those in power to views from across society and provide platforms where those in authority have to explain and answer for their actions.

Programmes aimed at improving accountability that are supported by BBC Media Action reach more than 100 million people annually. Nationally representative surveys show that 30% of the people reached through this programming in nine countries strongly agreed that these programmes had helped to hold government to account. Eighty-two per cent either agreed or strongly agreed that they did so.

In many countries, people feel that ordinary citizens shouldn’t question those in authority. Increasing efficacy – the belief that people can effect change through their own and their community’s actions – is vital to shifting those norms. BBC Media Action’s research has shown that those exposed to its programmes are more likely to report higher efficacy. The following quote from BBC Media Action qualitative research illustrates changes in audience attitudes after watching Sema Kenya (Kenya Speaks), a nationally broadcast programme that enabled people to challenge and question leaders.

"There is somebody like me and you… when you watch, it kind of inspires you… – ‘if this person is participating, why am I not participating?’ … people don’t participate because they feel the political process is for the elites.” Male, 15–24, Nairobi urban, Kenya

The organisation also works with FM radio stations and other partners at a local level. For example, local discussion programmes in Nepal provide a platform from which local officials can be questioned and directly asked to follow up on issues of concern to local communities, compelling authorities to commit to action. These programmes also ensure the voices of all groups have the opportunity to be heard, motivating individuals and groups to take action to address problems.

"This type of format [local debate show] is effective. In this format, we get more participation where audiences can ask more questions…. It is effective in putting the pressure on the relevant authority.” Male panellist, Chitwan, Nepal

BBC Media Action also works through drama, generating discussion and debate at scale in society. In Nigeria, radio drama Story Story, based around a market and motor park, reaches more than 23 million people, exploring the lives and challenges of ordinary Nigerians. Audiences say that BBC Media Action’s dramas demonstrate how people can secure their rights and that they help change norms, such as those around the role of women in society.

“I don’t talk I always like been in my shell. But this Story Story has brought me out, it made me to be outspoken now, I feel if some person can make it in Story Story, let me practise it, I feel, ‘yes I also can do it’, then I take a bold step and I can stand my ground.” Female listener, Lagos, Nigeria
PART 5

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there is good evidence to suggest that independent media is among the most effective checks on corrupt power, but that enabling and sustaining independent media will require substantially more – and often different kinds of – support than it currently receives. Given the paucity of other income available to support media independence, the growing costs of corruption to development, and the economic and political investments in co-opting independent media, the international development sector should consider improving both the strategic, as well as financial, attention focused on this area.

Successful strategies need to be context-specific, evidence-based and underpinned by clear theories of change. They need to be rooted in an acknowledgement that corruption has both political aspects (it involves fundamentally a relationship of power) as well as social aspects (it is often commonly accepted as the way things work). Many support strategies that might be expected to be effective in other settings are unlikely to be effective in fragile states if, for example, the rule of law is absent. Clear, coherent, prioritised strategies will look different in different settings and, based on the evidence available, there is no simple policy blueprint for addressing the shortfall in support that currently exists.

Specific policy conclusions around effective ways of supporting the media to tackle corruption and increase accountability in fragile states are outlined in the rest of this section.

Adapting strategies to the media and political context: There are few universal answers about how to work with the media, including online, to tackle corruption in fragile states. Where power, including corrupt power, is strong and media organisations are weak, a clear analysis of the political-economic dynamics around the media, and of the impact and dynamics of corruption, are essential. So too is research into what sources of information people trust and how their information and communication needs can best be met to improve accountability. While there

Above Bidhya Chapagain hosts Sajha Sowal (Common Questions), which travels around Nepal enabling people to ask questions of their political leaders. It is one of the most popular TV programmes in the country, reaching more than 6 million Nepalis.
are numerous media support strategies available to achieve impact in this area, the mix of strategies likely to be most effective will need to be rooted in such contextual analysis.

Defend media freedom: As this paper makes clear, media freedom and independence is in increasing peril. Consequently, there is a substantial risk that corruption will increase. The need for networks and organisations capable of defending media freedom and supporting public interest media around the world, including in fragile states, has rarely been greater. Given the costs inflicted by corruption on development and democracy, there is an increasingly compelling rationale for development actors, including those who have not traditionally prioritised support to free and independent media, to do so.

Prioritise media support in national development support strategies: Support to independent media is poorly prioritised in national development support strategies. Any support to the media needs to be in a framework that is separate from normal development arrangements to ensure that government influence (either donor or recipient) does not undermine independence of the media. Media support can also be better integrated into governance and other development assessments, such as political economy analysis, governance reviews (including peer review mechanisms) and the electoral cycle approach. An important step forward would be to have a clear, senior and country-level focal point from the donor community capable of understanding the threats to the media and its support needs, and influencing development priorities. While acknowledging the intense pressures on staff resourcing at headquarter levels, it is difficult to see how these issues can be better prioritised unless there are dedicated personnel focused on the issue in both bilateral and multilateral donor agencies.

Give teeth to transparency efforts: Important and substantial efforts have been made in recent years to make governance systems more transparent and to make data publicly accessible. Some of the assumptions underpinning such strategies – that journalists and civil society groups will use this data to demand increased accountability – rest on there being a critical mass of such groups with both the independence and capacity to do so. That assumption is questionable in many fragile states. Much more needs to be done to increase this capacity, such as through training for journalists, including on data journalism. This training will only succeed if it is nested within a broader strategy that guarantees both independence and the existence of a media that is trusted by, and accessible to, society at large.

Strengthen evidence and learning around effective media support: Very few learning systems have enabled the development community to establish which media support strategies work, which do not, and which can usefully inform policy and research agendas. Those systems need to be strengthened where they do exist, and established where they do not. Nor is there sufficient policy-relevant research on the links between the 21st-century media and corruption, especially in fragile states. This requires a strengthened research capacity, as well as better incentives for academic research that can effectively inform policy around these complex issues.

Take the media seriously: Many development actors find issues around media support to be complex, difficult and highly political. The media can be sensational, inaccurate and distorting in its coverage of important topics. In fragile states, manipulated and co-opted media organisations can stoke factionalism and sometimes drive violence – making some development actors perceive the media as a problem rather than a solution. These factors highlight why independent media needs more support and why, despite the complexity of the task, this support is likely to be an important challenge that the international development community needs to confront in the 21st century.
Endnotes


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


10. McMillan, J. and Zoido, P. (2004) How to Subvert Democracy: Montesinos in Peru [online]. CDDR Working Papers, No.3: 11 August 2004. Available from: http://cddrif.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/Montesinos_in_Peru.pdf [Accessed 2 August 2016]. This paper analysed the prices that President Alberto Fujimori’s secret police chief, Vladimiro Montesinos Torres, was prepared to pay to ensure that democratic institutions did not threaten the corrupt exercise of power. It found that “The typical bribe paid to a television-channel owner was 100 times
larger than that paid to a politician, which was somewhat larger than that paid to a judge. One single television channel’s bribe was five times larger than the total of the opposition politicians’ bribes.


Available from: http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/trust/pdf/kenya_policy_briefing_08.pdf


24 Ibid.


Ibid. p.10.


Ibid. p.1.


Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.


Acknowledgements

BBC Media Action is the BBC’s international development charity. We use the power of media and communication to help reduce poverty and support people in understanding their rights. Our aim is to inform, connect and empower people around the world. We work in partnership with broadcasters, governments, non-governmental organisations and donors to share timely, reliable and useful information. The content of this report is the responsibility of BBC Media Action. Any views expressed in this report should not be taken to represent those of the BBC itself, or any donors supporting the work of the charity.

This policy briefing is based on an earlier working paper on the same theme and was prepared thanks to funding from the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which supports the policy and research work of BBC Media Action. The author would like to thank Alina Rocha Menocal, Micol Martini and Juliet Walton at DFID and iMedia Associates for helpful comments on the working paper as well as Gabriella Montinola, especially for her very helpful insight into the literature around media and corruption.

Thanks also to Delia Lloyd and Will Taylor at BBC Media Action. Rayyan Sabet-Parry provided able research assistance.

Editor: Delia Lloyd
Author: James Deane
Copy editors: Katy Williams and Sophia Nikolaou
Proof reader: Lorna Fray
Designer: Marten Sealby
Production team: Maresa Manara, Anna Egan