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ON

Media Monitoring

*The Media and Their
Contribution to Democracy*

Introduction

Can Media Monitoring Support Democracy?

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Democracy as a fundamental governance principle is a highly successful political concept. All over the world an ever-increasing number of states confess their respect for democratic governance principles. Mass media are central to the functioning of democratic rule as they (1) inform the public and the electorate about public matters, (2) provide a platform for public discourse and deliberation, (3) give voice to a variety of social groups and thereby mediate between positions and interests, and (4) control those in power by fulfilling a watchdog function and by holding them accountable. However, these widely accepted four tasks of the mass media in contemporary democracies are requirements formulated by theorists and academic scholars. Journalists and editors are more cautious in listing their democratic duties, bearing in mind the many hurdles and obstacles such normative requirements face in day-to-day practice. Although scholars insist that these requirements are the price to be paid for the numerous privileges mass media and journalists enjoy in public life, media professionals prefer to point to media freedom as a decisive core value in democracies. Unhindered media freedom would, they argue, deliver the best achievable result for democracy. Media organizations managed to present media freedom as an intangible dogma in any debate about media and democracy.

However, there are good reasons to challenge this dogma. Mass media have become major actors in public life themselves, the ongoing and accelerating commercialization of the mass media erodes their independence from economic powers, and various processes of technological, socio-economic and cultural change question the position of the mass media as unique and democratic engines of public discourse. The emerging global economic recession is likely to further erode the financial and economic foundation of mass media companies.

Academic research has been constantly involved in the debate on the contribution of the mass media to democracy over the decades. Since the *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm, 1956) the role of old and new mass media in democracy has been widely discussed both in political science and mass communication studies (Hindman 2009; Christians et al. 2009; Baker 2007; Dahlberg and Siapera 2007; Prior 2007; Ociecka 2005; Jenkins and Thorburn 2003; Meyer 2002). Fresh impetus was given to this debate when a large number of countries in Central- and Eastern Europe as well as Central Asia became known as *democracies in transition* or *new democracies* in the 1990s. The role of the mass media had to be defined and best-practice examples of Western *established democracies* were thoroughly studied. Governmental, inter-governmental and even more non-governmental experts travelled to the regions with advice on how to establish mass media structures supportive for democracy. Not all these initiatives have been successful, and the idea of exporting Western media models to Eastern Europe and Central Asia has been re-thought given the various local and regional characteristics (Jakubowicz 2007).

This book contributes to the debate about the role of the mass media in contemporary democracies. A particular focus rests on the question of how to monitor the contribution of mass media to democracy. In June 2007, SwissGIS, the Swiss Centre for Studies on the Global Information Society, organized “On Media Monitoring—The Media and Their Contribution to Democracy” at the University of Zurich. This conference was the starting point for further discussion between conference speakers and other interested scholars from Europe and beyond. In September 2008 another SwissGIS conference was convened in San Francisco under the heading “Different Democracies, Same Media Power?” SwissGIS then decided to invite scholars and professionals to contribute to this book.

Our theme is media monitoring initiatives, their achievements and their flaws. There are different forms of media monitoring. In 1999, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Michael Griffin edited a reader, *International Media Monitoring*, presenting various ways and concepts as well as examples of media monitoring, such as media performance in the public interest (see the chapter by Denis McQuail). In his introduc-

tory chapter Kaarle Nordenstreng suggested assembling the various works of content analysis by university scholars and students to arrive at a clearer picture of what the mass media deliver to democracy. But content analysis alone, he admitted, would not deliver a complete picture: “Is not content just a reflection of structures of production and distribution, ultimately ownership? Is not content after all an ahistorical category?” (Nordenstreng 1999, 11) Starting from this insight, this book concentrates on mass media monitoring initiatives that go beyond content analysis. Media structure, media ownership, media policy, media economics, media law and regulation—all these aspects are important indicators of how well the mass media serve democracies.

SwissGIS therefore called for contributions that describe and analyse such monitoring initiatives. One rather surprising first finding was that the majority of identified monitoring initiatives were not of academic origin and not theory based. Professional organisations as well as non-governmental or para-governmental organisations are much more active in monitoring the mass media for democracy than is academic research.

A second finding was that there are many more initiatives monitoring countries in their transition to democracy than initiatives that monitor the contribution of the mass media to established democracies. In the former cases, research efforts normally include structural features, legal issues, and content analysis of media coverage. In the latter cases, however, the research interest is often limited to media content with little reference to media structure. In our selection of articles we tried to strike a suitable balance between monitoring initiatives with an academic origin (Trappel/Maniglio, Weissenbach), governmental origin (some initiatives described by Becker/Vlad) and non-governmental origin (Deutsch Karlekar). Moreover, we intended to cover different aspects of media monitoring, such as media freedom in mature democracies as well as in countries in transition, the media’s contribution for democracy and media organizations. These themes make up the three parts of the book:

Part I looks into different initiatives mainly concerned with monitoring media freedom in various contexts. Lee B. Becker and Tudor Vlad (University of Georgia, United States), “A Preliminary Model for Evaluating Media Assistance,” present a meta-perspective to media freedom monitoring initiatives, and media assistance initiatives. The chapter begins with a discussion of some common assumptions about the role of media in fostering democracy in the context of more general theoretical discussions of the link between the media and democracy. The chapter looks at what is known about the success of media assistance in democracies in transition and takes a critical stance on some of these assistance programmes.

Karin Deutsch Karlekar (Freedom House) reports her experiences with one of the most prominent monitoring initiatives, the Freedom of the Press Index. She looks into the strengths and weaknesses of that instrument and how the instrument is used.

Lucie Hribal (University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur, Switzerland) and Kristina Weissenbach (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany) follow up the general debate on media monitoring in countries in transition and analyse critically the ongoing monitoring efforts. Hribal draws from her field experiences in Kyrgyzstan; Weissenbach describes the procedures and achievements of the Research Group on Governance, who developed a monitoring instrument for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. This instrument, focussing on media freedom, has been used twice in 2005 and 2008 in several countries in transition.

Part II presents the findings of an international research project. Josef Trappel and Tanja Maniglio (University of Zurich, Switzerland) develop the Media for Democracy Monitor (MDM) and present the findings of their first round of country studies. Based on a theoretical framework of mass media in mature democracies, the authors develop a variety of indicators to document the performance level leading news media have achieved. The findings show that among the five countries that applied the MDM to their leading news media, the Netherlands score highest, followed by Germany and Switzerland. The whole process of how these indicators have been developed and applied by experienced social scientists in each country is documented in this chapter.

For each of these five countries, detailed analysis has been undertaken to apply the MDM-indicators. Leen d'Haenens for the Netherlands, Frank Marcinkowski and André Donk for Germany, Tanja Maniglio and Josef Trappel for Switzerland, Joaquim Fidalgo for Portugal and Auksė Balčytienė and Eglė Napryte for Lithuania describe and analyse the role leading news media play in their respective countries to fulfil the requirements of contemporary democracies.

Part III takes up two important monitoring aspects within media companies. Robert Picard (Reuters Institute, Oxford University) and Torbjörn von Krogh (Mid-Sweden University) highlight specific aspects of media monitoring. Robert Picard looks into various monitoring topics within media companies under the umbrella of corporate governance. Von Krogh discusses the value of monitoring concepts of accountability with reference to several efforts undertaken in Europe to hold mass media accountable to democratic values.

As editors we express our gratitude to all participants in the 2007 and 2008 SwissGIS conferences who contributed in the vivid discussions to shape the topic. We thank all those who accepted our invitation to transmit manuscripts for this

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We hope we have contributed some useful thoughts on this important topic and we hope that this book is again a starting point for further deliberations about how to monitor the contribution of the mass media to democracy.

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