

Development Agenda: Considering the Dark Side of the Media

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News media have the potential to support economic and social improvements in developing countries and emerging economies. But in reality they often fail to do so. Instead of serving the public and speaking truth to power, many media may act as mouthpieces of the powerful, repeat rumors without verification, discriminate against minorities, and feed the polarization of societies. Such media actions have a harmful influence that reaches far beyond the media sector itself. In this paper, we describe different phenomena of what we call the dark side of the media, and we look at how the dark side interacts in a dynamic way with other features of the governance environment. We propose a heuristic model to describe negative and positive dynamics between the media sector and the wider political, economic, and cultural context. New and broader strategies in media development are needed to tackle this problem.

The important role that news media play in human societies has been recognized for centuries. The media brings news and information to people that helps them make informed decisions, establish democratic controls on power, and root out corruption and misuse of public resources. Information distributed through television, radio, print, Internet and mobile phones helps create open and competitive markets that are the foundation of a successful economic system. Freedom of expression and freedom of the press were recognized as so fundamental to global order that these concepts were embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a core building block of the United Nations.

The expansion of Internet connectivity and mobile phones has brought the promise of the media to the doorsteps of communities across the entire globe. Already, the world has more mobile phone subscriptions, 7 billion and rising, than it has people.¹ The data traffic in mobile phones in Africa is predicted to increase 20-fold between 2013 and 2019.² And more than 3 billion people across the world have access to the Internet, with connectivity spreading fastest in the developing world.³ Google, Facebook, and other companies are experimenting with balloons and drones to bring the

Internet to the remaining remote areas, creating genuine promise in our lifetimes of a truly connected world.

But at this time of widespread technological promise and ubiquitous information, a stark reality confronts us: In much of the world, the news and information media has strayed far from its potential and its guiding ideals. Weakened by a faltering business model and a growing number of authoritarian or kleptocratic regimes, many media in today's world are mere mouthpieces of the powerful. In the developing world, where independent news and information may have the most potential for positive impact, a staggering share of the media is controlled by partisan political forces, crony capitalists, or criminals.

¹ www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx

² Ericsson (2014)

³ For aggregated Internet connectivity data from a variety of authoritative sources see www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.

The rise of social media alongside traditional media institutions has created a new dynamic in the world's information infrastructure with many benefits, but it also presents its own set of challenges for the quality of information. Rumors are repeated without verification. Propaganda and conspiracy theories spread at unprecedented speed. Rather than fostering discussion and consensus in society, many media cater to a single social or ethnic group and encourage polarization. As important news is distorted, censored, or neglected, neither journalists nor citizens are able to exercise their full rights and responsibilities.

This is the dark side of the media.

The darkness comes in different forms, and it may stay below the surface and spread its tentacles in different directions. And then, all of a sudden it can take root like a cancer. The dark side deprives people of their right to information, whips up passions with misleading distortions or outright lies, hinders economic renewal, and may trigger violence and war. Today, the dark side of the media is raging across many regions, one example being Eastern Europe, where propaganda is a frontline tool of influence and conflict.

Dysfunctional media systems are difficult to repair, even by highly motivated, reform-minded governments. These environments are generally characterized by deeply vested interests of powerful economic and political forces. For the same reason, these systems pose a particular challenge to the international media development community, which has for years operated under the assumption that media systems can be improved through the right mixture of technical advice, training, and other sector-level interventions.

Some donors have recently applied a human rights approach to their work in media development, an approach that points out the universally agreed rights to freedom of expression and the press under international agreements. It emphasizes not only the rights of citizens but also the obligations of the state to guarantee and advance these rights. This human rights approach – which also recognizes the systemic, overarching nature of the media and its impact on society – is a step forward compared to the technocratic solutions of the past. But the continuing spread of the dark side of the media may argue for taking this concept a step further to confront the deeply political nature of this problem.

Dark Strains in the Media

Much work remains to be done to fully describe the dark side of the media, how it takes root and spreads. In 2014 an expert workshop organized by DW Akademie in Bonn brought together a group of scholars and practitioners from the field of media development and made a first attempt at analyzing the dark side phenomenon and its broader impact on, and interaction with, other features of the governance environments in afflicted countries.

What we know is that distorted media is a global problem and that highly industrialized economies are not immune. But the dark side is most often a creature of the poor governance and economic manipulation that thrives in fragile and post-conflict societies and under authoritarian, isolationist, or corrupt regimes. Thus a deeper understanding of the overall governance environments of countries is critical to an analysis of their media sectors, and many of the remedies may reside outside the media sector itself.

Just how much of the world's media fits into this category is also an open question; and measuring all dimensions and the progression of the dark side phenomenon would require a much more ambitious effort at data collection than is currently underway. Existing press freedom indices and sector-level instruments like the Media Sustainability Index – which assemble cross-country perceptions on topics such as the level of censorship, government or commercial interference, or the level of professionalism and ethical practices by media firms – suggest that the problem is growing and spreading. Beyond the media sector, the complex, interconnected and systemic nature of dysfunction requires examination of dimensions of governance as measured by, for example, the Worldwide Governance Indicators, which also suggest flat or declining average performance on a global basis.⁴

Efforts to track and measure ownership structures of media organizations may also add to our understanding. Two efforts in the emerging economies of Eastern Europe look more deeply into media ownership structures and the concept of “media capture” which refers to media systems that have become tools of ruling economic and political elites. The first – sponsored by the Open Society Institute (now the Open Society Foundations), the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Guardian Foundation and implemented by the South East European Network for Professionalization of the Media – included an 18-country, in-depth survey of ownership patterns and their effects. That work, completed in 2004, remains highly valuable not only in defining the contours of the problem at that time but also warning of troubles that were to emerge and worsen in the ensuing decade.⁵

The Authoritarian State

Authoritarian, poorly governed and weak regimes are rich breeding grounds for distorted media. The state, which often feels threatened and weakened by the rapid expansion of new digital media technologies, nonetheless creates much of the environment under which the media operates, from the laws on freedom of expression and competition law, to setting the regulatory conditions for allocation of broadcast spectra and state-financed advertising. Censorship and soft censorship (manipulating media through government advertising budgets) may have a strong influence on the media outlets that are struggling to find independent business models. Meanwhile, as citizens use social media to organize against state abuses and power, state bodies are deploying the same technologies to conduct surveillance on citizens.

The Manipulative Private Sector

Even in highly developed countries, media can be almost entirely captured by private sector interests whose main purpose is to gain power and influence. Some countries, such as Turkey and Ecuador, have swung between private capture and state capture; others, such as many countries of Southeast Europe, present a mixture of the two, with the ownership structures of media enterprises highly opaque. Governance expert Alina Mungui-Pippidi noted in an interview last year with CIMA that such environments may be measured by the over-saturation of media in relation to the size of the population, a condition which arises only when a majority of market participants are willingly operating at a loss, indicating that their main aims are political.⁷

More recent work by the Media Ownership Project is an ongoing attempt to measure ownership patterns in 11 countries of Eastern Europe, these media's extent of ownership transparency, and connections to politics and crime. That project has created a database that by May 2015 had some 503 media outlets, of which 37 percent have been designated as non-transparent, 25 percent flagged for connections to politics, and 10 percent linked to crime.⁶

The participants of the 2014 DW Akademie workshop agreed that environments that give rise to the dark side of media can be characterized by a number of distinct governance characteristics that often co-occur: an authoritarian state; a manipulative private sector; weak supporting institutions and business failure; bribery and corruption; social and political polarization; and neglect of minorities. These elements and their impact on media systems are described in the Box above.

Weak Supporting Institutions, Business Failure, Bribery and Corruption

Media can be deeply distorted by the lack of a supporting business climate or by pervasive public and private corruption. Such environments tend to produce media that are easily influenced, particularly through bribery and the corruption of underpaid journalists. The lack of ethical norms and practices in a society as a whole, coupled with weak civil society to provide checks and balances against abuses of power, undermine the governance system and weaken the media's credibility as a watchdog.

Polarization, Hate Speech and Neglect of Minorities

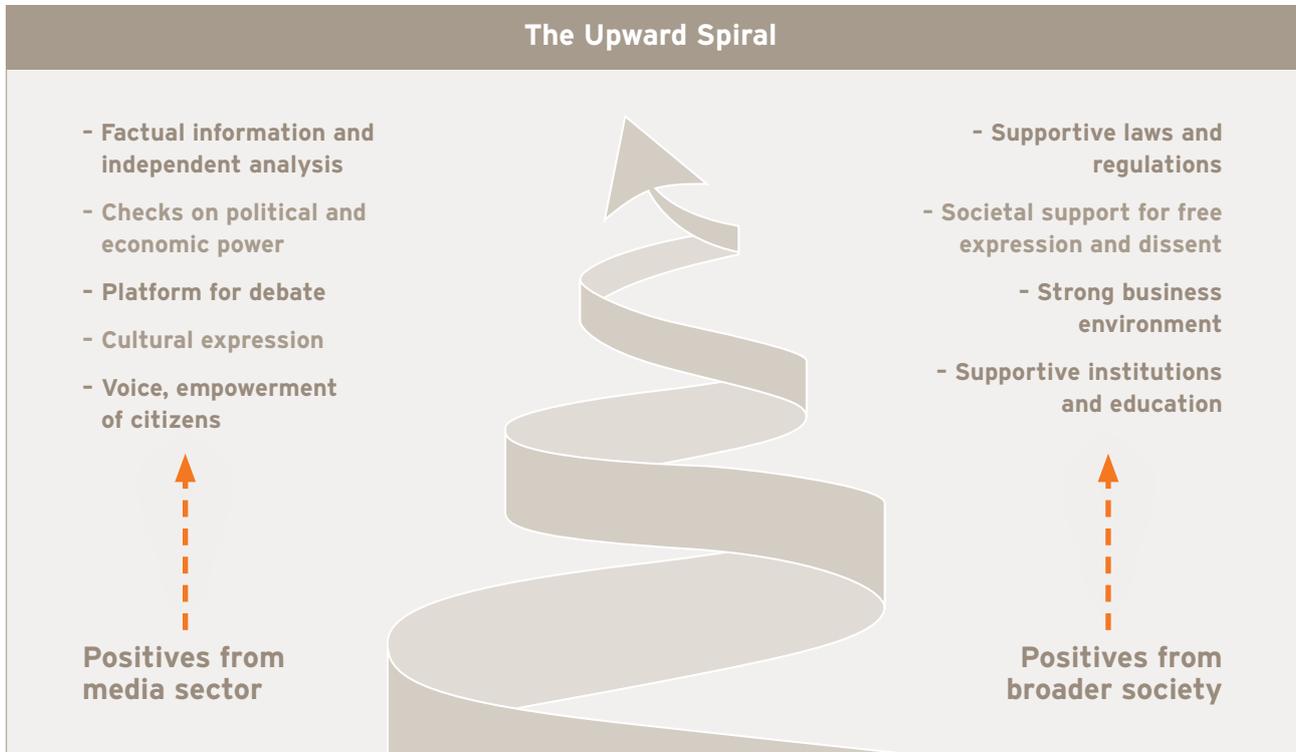
Another dark-side role of the media emerges in the context of fragile and conflict-prone societies, or countries that are deeply divided by ethnic or religious conflict. Unchecked and manipulated, the media can become a major protagonist in such conflicts, trading in hate speech, ethnic slurs, and distorted claims of one group against another. As mentioned, such behaviors were manifest in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, as well as in the Rwandan genocide. Similar worries are emerging from the ethnic divides in Myanmar, China, and even Indonesia and India. Even when the media steers clear of inciting racism and ethnic hatred, it can fail to cover the issues facing minority populations, which are often isolated geographically and poorly represented in national politics.

⁴ See www.govindicators.org for latest data, academic papers, and definitions.

⁵ For further information on this work and links to publications, see <http://mediaobservatory.net/library/media-ownership-and-its-impact-media-independence-and-pluralism-2004-0>

⁶ This data was presented on May 2, 2014, by Drew Sullivan of the Organized Crime and Reporting Project (OCCRP) at World Press Freedom Day in Riga, Latvia. The 11 countries tracked by this project are: Bosnia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. <http://reportingproject.net/media/>

⁷ For earlier research on this topic, see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi and Cristian Ghinea, "Struggling with Media Capture: Romania," in *Understanding Media Policies: A European Perspective*, ed. Evangelia Psychogiopoulou (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 166–181.



Media and Governance Dynamics: Two Spirals

While the interplay between the governance environment and the media sector has long been recognized, our work suggests that media and governance aspects can create a dynamic process that reinforces the effects. To illustrate this, we propose a simple and heuristic description of the relationship between media and society, and how each influences the evolution of the other. In so doing, we do not propose a complete theory but merely attempt to capture the initial ideas of our working group.

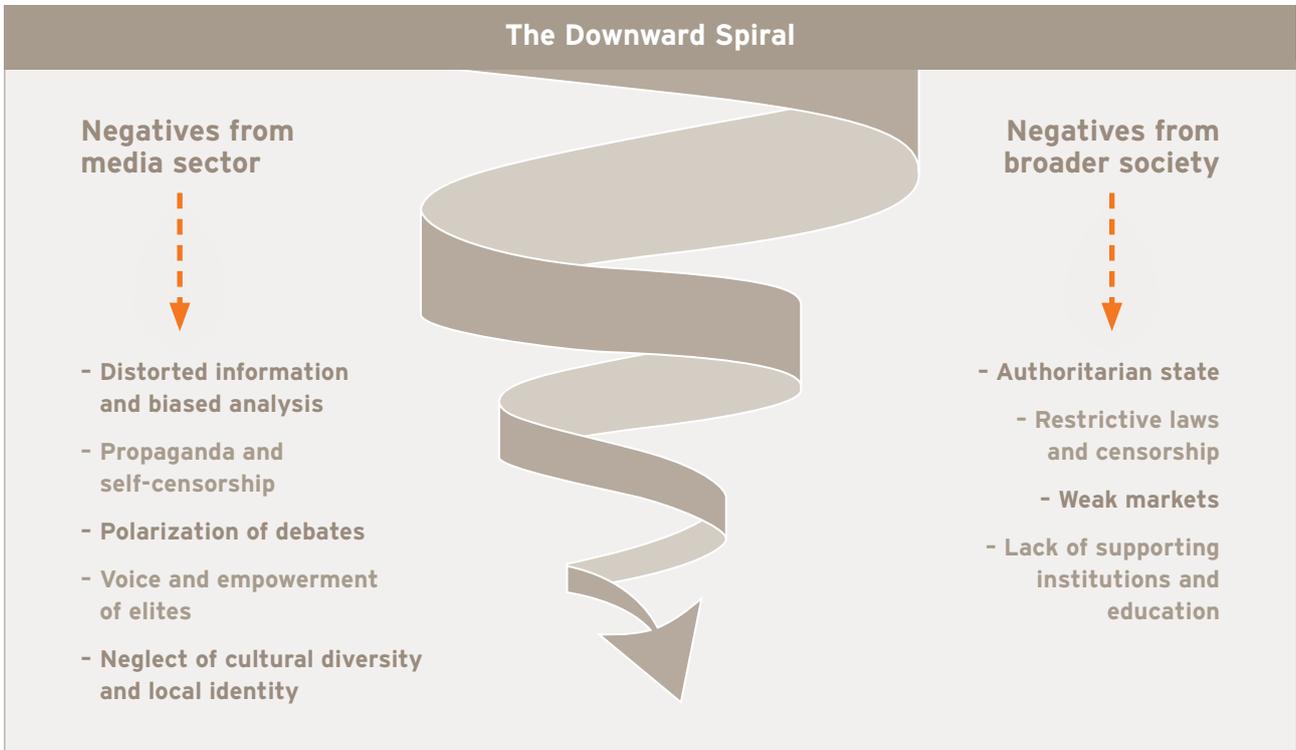
In this analysis, we differentiate between two idealized processes: Firstly, a fruitful relationship where society strengthens the media sector and the media delivers positive outcomes to society. And secondly a problematic relationship between the two: The media sector is hindered and restricted and, as a consequence, it delivers dysfunctional outcomes. We call these two idealized scenarios the upward spiral and the downward spiral (see the two illustrations above).

Our graphic attempts to depict two dynamic spirals that emerge in the interaction between the media sector and broader society that produce dramatically different outcomes for both society and the media system. The spirals are composed of dimensions of the overall environment, listed on the right side of the diagram, that not only produce

outcomes for society as a whole but also affect the media sector. On the left side, are features of the media system that engage within these overall dynamics and both contribute to them and are influenced by them. Thus the media in this model is both a dependent as well as an independent variable: a structure that is influenced by other actors as well as one that exerts its own influence.

Upward Spiral

Among the dimensions that propel societies and their media sectors in a positive direction are institutions such as supportive laws and regulations, a democratic state, support from political actors for free expression and dissent, healthy markets, active citizens, supporting educational bodies, and professional associations. A well-functioning media system benefits from and contributes to these positive forces and reinforces their effects. Among the possible positive factors from the media system are reliable information that supports good quality decisions by the public, business, and political leaders; checks on economic and political power and enhanced accountability; improved debate and increased citizen voice, including through an active use of social media; and open cultural expression and inclusion of isolated communities.



Downward Spiral

Negative influences on media and society include factors such as an authoritarian state, a flawed legal and regulatory framework, political actors that only use the media in their own interest, passive citizens, weak markets, or a lack of supporting and educational institutions. These adverse incentives in turn can be propelled and reinforced by a flawed or captured media system that produces biased information and analysis, propaganda, polarization of public views, and suppression of cultural diversity and local identity.

The Upward and the Downward Spiral

While the two spirals can be seen as idealized types, the reality for most countries is better described by a combination of the two. Both spirals are in motion at the same time, and while the upward spiral creates positive outcomes the downward spiral exerts its negative effects. This yields a new perspective on media development: Theories of change most often only describe upward movements and the dynamics that result in bettering a given situation. In this image, we consider both downward movements and their obstructive and destructive influence. The immediate lesson is that if media development practitioners want to effectively strengthen the upward spiral, they must articulate effective measures to deal with the dark side as well.



Implications for Media Development

The dark side of the media as described above, especially when combined with the dynamic spiraling effects and interactions with other aspects of governance, create a complex challenge for reformers. In the majority of cases, countries have tipped their media towards the dark side by seemingly small gestures that over time get caught in the downward spiral and become much bigger, more entrenched, and difficult to address.

Tanzania, once a country that made impressive gains in fighting corruption and improving governance, recently passed two new laws, ostensibly to reduce cybercrime and “misleading or false” information. Such laws are often followed by more draconian measures against offending journalists or independent media owners. Over time, as the media space is increasingly captured by an overzealous government and owners who are seeking favors, the whole media and governance space becomes impervious to reforms. Such was the path taken by Turkey, Russia, Romania, Hungary, and many more. Is Tanzania next?

How does the international development community in general and, more specifically, media development organizations and their partners manage this challenge? Can they find the courage and the weapons to fully face this growing and complex problem?

Following the lessons from the global aid effectiveness debates, media development interventions have increasingly been designed to follow criteria established by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the forum of the 29 major aid donors: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact and sustainability. In many cases, project managers and their partners were compelled to focus their attention on ambitious indicators as proof of the success of their interventions. Projects were developed that moved beyond just training media professionals and delved more broadly into supporting new system-wide measures like improved legal frameworks, regulations, or approaches to financial sustainability.⁸

For countries with strong in-country leadership and demand for democracy and independent media, such approaches have often been successful. Innovative media development interventions, tools, and approaches have had a powerful and transformative impact on the quality and effectiveness of the media and may be seen as having produced positive benefits for society as a whole. Examples are the Baltic states, Poland, and Uruguay. Myanmar and Tunisia have also made rapid progress at some points in recent history.

But these countries have also seen periods when they were caught in the downdraft of a negative spiral, and possible reforms were hindered, slowed down, or even reversed. In Myanmar, which had shown such promise between 2010 and 2013, the downdraft is increasing against media reforms, coupled with the threat that newly won freedoms could be slowly eroded. Likewise, in Tunisia, political instability and the weakness of the economy are destabilizing young and independent media outlets, though it remains a relative bright spot in the region.

In other contexts where political leaders, and at time even citizens, are hostile to independent media, and where civil society is disorganized or suppressed, the actions of media developers often seem to have fallen flat. Cambodia, China, Russia, and Somalia come to mind. And despite stronger political risk analysis and awareness of the pitfalls of doing media work in an unsupportive environment, the dark side has continued to spread in far too many places across the world.

For media development actors, these environments in a downward spiral become increasingly difficult to manage, as the incentives turn against media sector reforms and capture local leadership in their wake. Whereas capacity building and organizational development are often helpful to support media actors in an upward spiral, the downward spiral requires completely different types of interventions, focused more on building stronger internal dialogue, the strengthening of non-governmental actors, international support networks, and other subtle and politically savvy interventions that demand patience and long-term vision.

So what can be done to improve media development interventions? Our working group examined three issues that deserve attention:

1. The missing or misleading elements in the design of interventions may be linked to faulty underlying **assumptions**. All development actors come from certain cultural and political backgrounds and make assumptions based on their experiences. Development experts with no specific expertise on the media and their partners in the country may tend to underestimate or misunderstand the media's potential, both positive and negative. Meanwhile media development experts may focus too heavily on optimistic results chains and underestimate the power of dark side elements that reside outside the media sector.

⁸ See DW Akademie 2014, 29.

A number of questions can be raised here: Do media development practitioners base their activities on norms and objectives that are compatible with those of their partners and the societies where they operate? How do partners on the ground understand the functions of a healthy media sector and its relationship to other sectors in society? Where do these local actors and leaders see potential for change? Are the different mobilizing objectives consistent with the values supposedly underpinning and legitimizing their development activities?

2. The problem may be **empirical**. Do development actors and their partners know enough about the topology and the ecology of the targeted media environments? To what extent do they understand the new digital media and their potential for positive as well as negative influences? How do they describe and measure not only the current state of media development in a given country but also define higher-level goals and find the pathway towards improvement? More adaptable analytical frameworks are needed to better understand the dark side and the broader context in which it operates, and to improve media development strategies.
3. It may also be a **methodological challenge**. Do media development actors in hostile environments have clear strategies for achieving shared aims with their partners, and alternative solutions that can be tested against each other and their outcomes measured? Do they have clear concepts about how to deal with the dark side of the media? And do they sufficiently share experience and knowledge of what is likely to work in a given context, what has worked elsewhere, and what is not likely to be effective?

These sector-level approaches are clearly not enough in themselves to make progress against the dark side. Overall, the evidence strongly suggests that the dark side of the media needs to be treated as part of a broad approach to improved governance. If effective governance is understood to be more than an efficient government, but as the advantageous integration of non-state actors into a government's discussions and actions – from anti-corruption campaigns, to decentralization, justice reform, and work on the improvement of government transparency – there can be no doubt that freedom of expression and independent media-need to be part of such efforts.

The Way Forward for Media Development

From a global perspective, the world of independent media and free expression is engulfed in a downward spiral in far too many parts of the world. At a time of expanding authoritarianism and unpredictable changes in technology

and business models, the need for a new approach to addressing this problem is long past due. While the space for media development work is shrinking a variety of reports and reviews of the work in the media sector suggest that much can still be done.⁹

Besides the classical strengthening of the media sector—through measures such as reforms of media laws and regulations, capacity building and protection of journalists, strengthening of independent and non-profit media outlets in their business models—we also need to take action at the global, regional, and country levels, with a special emphasis on governance reform processes. In particular, we propose the following:

- Integrate media development more explicitly within the overall development agenda and development assistance planning processes, as well as in post-conflict and peace building agendas.
- Ensure that programs focused on public sector reform, governance, and other cross cutting sectors include the needs of the media sector and help build stronger country-level leadership for media development through learning, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and improved global and regional data on the media sector.
- Establish multi-stakeholder “wise persons” groups at country and regional levels to examine the media sector, the quality of the laws, regulations, enabling conditions, as well as the potential of new digital media, and to propose reforms.

Without a doubt, we in the media development community have much to learn in proposing measures to slow down or reverse the proliferation of the dark side of the media. To consolidate this agenda and shape it to local demands, DW Akademie and CIMA are planning to launch a series of regional consultations on media development that would in turn feed into dialogue with global media development donors. Modeled on the regional consultations that preceded the global aid effectiveness meetings (Rome in 2003, Paris in 2005, Accra in 2008, and Busan in 2011), these consultations are designed to understand from local stakeholders what they see as the major constraints to, and opportunities for, media development in their countries and regions. The consultations also aim to create an action plan for activists, country stakeholders, and donors that is well grounded in country needs and improved governance approaches and that enjoys strong local leadership and ownership.

⁹ For an overview of opinions of media development interventions by external agents, see Nelson/Susman-Peña, 2012) For a review of the challenges for outside agencies in supporting highly politicized governance work in various environments, see, for example, World Bank (2012).

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