

## Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.  
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# Why Rwanda and Libya need free speech – and media regulation

Jerry Timmins describes a new report on media in two post-conflict societies, and argues that countries like Britain should do more to support them.



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Not enough is being done to support the creation of independent media in developing countries. The UK government in particular is not giving enough thought to the role of media in development and it needs to consider very carefully the example it sets in the wake of the Leveson Inquiry. Unfortunately, media is simply not a priority on the UK's development agenda. It does not feature in DfiD's five-year plan. In spite of a strong desire to see improvements in good governance in recipient countries and the central role played by the media in the UK in keeping politicians honest and scrutinising the impact of government policies, media policy and the role of media in a developing democracy gets remarkably little attention from the UK's development experts. Where the media does feature, it is as a messaging tool about other priorities, such as poverty reduction, health and education.

This is odd. This is how dictators use the media; not as a fundamental tool to help the general public hold politicians to account and scrutinise big business, but as a way of telling people what is expected of them and what they should do. Even though donor countries including the UK, emphasise the need for good governance and spend much time discussing how to combat corruption and improve transparency within recipient government departments, media seems to feature very low on the agenda when such important discussions are taking place. This again is odd when you look at donor countries themselves and how they operate at home.

Take the key issues that have risen to the top of the political and social agenda in the UK over the last couple of years. The MPs expenses scandal was brought to light by the media, in the form of The Daily Telegraph. Illegal phone tapping was not put on the agenda by a police investigation but because The Guardian newspaper relentlessly pursued the story. Even the banking crisis was not flagged up by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in parliament but by the BBC, which discovered that a major bank was in grave financial difficulties. So everyone in the UK accepts that an independent media, operating largely at arm's length from government, play an essential role in a functioning democracy. But when it comes to talking about development with other countries, the media's role is reduced to "getting the message across".

It is of course not true that donors only spend money on messaging. They also spend large amounts on training journalists. However, much of this training is a waste of money. This is not because the quality of the training is poor or because there is anything wrong with the trainees, it is because if you do nothing to change the environment in which the trainees work, then they are unable to put what they learn in to practise. If the journalists return to work to find the editor on the phone to the Ministry of Information before every editorial meeting, they are hardly going to feel motivated to take any risks or do anything differently. In order to improve the working environment for journalists, you need the government to adopt a progressive media policy and edit any laws and regulations that get in the way of good journalism. However, engaging with governments to redefine the media landscape and do this kind of work, too often gets put in to the box marked "too difficult". Training, on the other hand, often attracts funding because it is easy to measure, relatively easy to organise and can even be carried out without the need for awkward conversations with government officials.

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The newly released report called [“Free Speech, Free Press, Free Societies” published by The Legatum Institute](#), details initiatives undertaken by the authorities in both Libya and Rwanda to change the media landscape and introduce changes that could significantly improve the environment in which journalists work. Even though the governments themselves are demonstrating a willingness to tackle these difficult issues, the only foreign donor country to step in and offer financial support has been the Dutch government. The report goes in to detail about the nature of the discussions and the desire expressed by those in the media and in government to explore new thinking that goes beyond the old fashioned central control exercised by both countries in the past. In Rwanda it represents a potentially radical rethink by the current government, which has done much to rebuild the country in the wake of the horrific 1994 genocide. The government says that a more independent and responsible media could help the country gain a new role as a digital hub in East Africa, promoting further economic growth – which is already impressive – and helping to invigorate an increasingly educated youth. In Libya, it represents a widely held view that a post Qaddafi government should allow the very freedoms that were denied to Libyans for so long by a regime that did not tolerate opposition of any kind. In a country where many have already received a university education and civil society groups are expanding rapidly, an independent media gives boundless new opportunities for both political and social engagement.

When foreign governments starts to recognise the potential that can flow from more independent media, and start to explore new approaches to media regulation and media law, it is time for donor governments to take media reform out of the “too difficult” box. What is needed is engagement. Engagement in new, less formal and more imaginative ways to support new thinking as it emerges. For once this is not about new investment. What is needed is a desire to facilitate informal, off the record, free thinking debates about what might be possible in countries where the authorities have already said they want change but too often find themselves on the defensive because of the politics of “events” or because they feel their critics in more developed countries are always seeking to paint them in the worst light, when in fact both countries are in a much better place than they were 15 years ago.

It is not that newspapers should refrain from carrying critical articles about either country. It is simply a matter of supporting good ideas when they surface. It is not going to be possible to achieve a perfect regulatory framework in either country in one bound. There are real security issues that need to be balanced off in any solution. But if there is a chance for genuine incremental improvements then this should be encouraged and supported. This is not just a matter of providing support on the ground and pushing media up the development agenda. It is also a matter of setting an example at home. What happens domestically in the UK matters because time and again countries look to the UK as one example of how an independent media is maintained and regulated. So the final outcome that emerges from the Leveson Inquiry will have a significant influence well beyond the shores of the United Kingdom. It would certainly be odd if – just at the moment other countries consider introducing self-regulation and ease legal restrictions which have hampered good journalism – the UK decided to introduce some kind of statutory underpinning for press regulation, for the first time in 300 years. Anyone who suggests that what happens in the UK

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does not have a direct impact on the way other Middle Eastern and African countries behave needs to travel more. A rush to introduce new laws to oversee the press in the UK will undoubtedly have a negative impact well beyond these shores.

We should be careful too about one of the assumptions contained in the Leveson report. One strand of thought running through it suggests that journalists working for the written press need special treatment. This is an idea that has come under detailed question in other countries that are thinking of deregulating. In a world where it is increasingly hard to tell the difference between a journalist or a blogger on the internet or someone who writes on Facebook, why should the journalist have more protection than any other citizen who writes? Surely the public interest is potentially served by both and both should deserve protection?

Leveson is in danger of turning everyone's focus on journalists who write for the written press at a time when the written press is shrinking and the internet is growing in influence and relevance. This of course is not to suggest that the internet should be censored. The point is that free speech should be defended wherever it occurs and that all should operate within the law. The law should be used against anyone who clearly incites violence or hatred or anyone who steals from or harasses other people. But comment, ideas and opinion should be defended vigorously wherever they occur. Times change, social norms shift, so it is natural that media regulation and matters of press ethics will be an on-going matter of debate in all countries. But we should be aware that the world is watching the current debate in the UK and - particularly at a time when other countries are thinking of easing the burden of media legislation and regulation - the UK needs to think very carefully about the implications of tightening it.

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