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# Impartiality and autonomy

## *Preconditions for journalism in weak states*

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### Abstract:

The autonomous role of Swedish journalists has been won after centuries of bitter struggle since the first laws on liberties for the printed press was legislated in 1766. Sweden is well repudiated for this professional culture, which implies an independent and impartial social role for mass media, free from state censorship, open to investigative reporting and critical debate; in other words autonomous media able to sustain impartial reporting.

Efforts to create a similar position for the media in post-conflict or transition states are countered by strong political and economic forces, by a path dependency of older rules and norms and also by lack of professionalism and investigative resources. In these states there is limited or legal protection of critical journalism and lack of a civil society that places demands on those in power and constitutes a counter-force against oppression and arbitrariness in the community.

In several states, especially those who previously lacked democratic mass media, there has emerged a plethora of new media which are independent in form but not in content. They are not functioning as correctives to power and offer no room for impartial journalism. Instead, they have become a megaphone for special interests. The question is why this development has taken place and which strategies internal and external actors apply to change the situation.

Currently there are extensive studies of journalism in war, conflict and change phases. But there is very limited research on the development of journalism in subsequent periods.

The chapter addresses the points of departure for future research on the conditions for journalism in states after crisis, open conflict and substantial social transitions. Studies in states such as Afghanistan and Kosovo demonstrate that international actors, companies and aid agencies have acted inconsistent and ended up in the role-conflicts which frustrated efforts to create autonomous and impartial journalism.

**Key words:** mass media autonomy, impartial reporting, journalistic independence, media and democracy, media development support

The focus of this chapter is preconditions for journalistic autonomy in weak states. The message is: without autonomy it is not possible for journalists to work impartially.

The chapter is built around four assumptions;

(1) History shows that the road to an autonomous journalist profession is long and winding, which has been the case in Sweden as well as in most other Western European countries in North America.

(2) It is not easy to export journalism to states in transition from authoritarian rule to democracy. Efforts in this direction have been hindered by a number of strong structural and situational obstacles.

(3) To make things even worse; attempts to promote democracy building via support to independent journalism in these states have been half-hearted and not very successful.

(4) For this strategy to be a success several goal-conflicts are to be overcome and strong pressure is needed from internal as well as external forces: mainly local civil society and international actors.

### **The long road to autonomy**

What is meant by an autonomous social position for journalism?

The concept is analytical and mostly used in research. Journalist does seldom label themselves as 'autonomous'. If asked, a journalist in our part of the world would probably describe herself as 'independent' 'impartial' and 'objective'.

These labels can be seen as parts of fundamental professional aspirations, although everyone is well aware of the difficulties to be totally independent, impartial or objective.

A profession is autonomous when it has a high degree of recognized and legalized independence. Lawyers, medical doctors and specialized engineers are often mentioned as examples of autonomous professions. Journalists are often labeled a semi-profession as there is no licensing that creates unique access to the craft. (Hallin/Mancini 2004, Kovach/Rosenstiel 2007).

We can distinguish between *external* autonomy and *internal* autonomy.

External autonomy is reached when journalists have been liberated from censorship and extensive control by the political power elite.

With internal autonomy is meant that the editorial staff can work independently of media company owners or the economy department but also that the individual journalist has space for initiative and high degree of integrity.

The time-span of reaching external as well as internal autonomy can be long, as is shown by the Swedish example.

The Swedish parliament adopted a Freedom of the Press Law in the late 1700s, the first of its kind in the world. It was followed by more than 50 years of stubborn struggle between autocracy (monarchy) and the journalists before consensus was reached for press external autonomy, followed by a period of more than hundred years of dominance of partisan journalism. The political parties owned or were close affiliated to the newspapers. News journalism was more or less openly framed by party politics and seen as important tools to reach and control public opinion (Gustafsson / Rydén 2010, Hadenius/Weibull/Wadbring 2008).

The breakthrough for both external and internal autonomy of the journalists in Sweden was closely connected to the gradually growth of consensus for the idea of independent and impartial reporting. This implies that journalism is as a craft serving the public, truthfully mirroring or objectively describing events and processes and thereby making it possible for citizens to take part in democracy. Proponents of the profession often emphasize that skilled reporters are in better position than other information professions to conduct impartial and critical reviewing of matters in society. The reason is that they are not biased by their task masters. They are only and foremost in service of their main clients: the public (Kovacs/ Rosenstiel 2007).

The concept of impartiality was early stated in the internal charter for Swedish press, radio and television, adopted by the industry representatives in the middle of the 1950's: 'Strive to give people who are criticized in a news report opportunity to respond to criticism. Try also to reflect the views of all parties'(SJF 2011).

The victory for this professional set of ideas, the professional ideology, was slow in coming and was not totally accepted until in the 1960's. The reason had to do with extensive changes in society and in the media landscape. Loyalties to political parties loosened during the 1950's. The new journalism ideology was heavily influenced by developments in North American and British mass media and transmitted by television news from international cable-networks. Furthermore, the winning ideology was definitely precipitated by state journalists schools started in the 1960's in the two largest cities Stockholm and Göteborg.

Broadcasting news was presented as impartial, radio news as early as 1937. Swedish radio became a corporatist monopoly of British design. Private companies did not get licenses until the 1990s. Television followed the same pattern changing only when the satellite broadcasts could bypass the law by broadcasting from abroad (Hadenius/Weibull/Wadbring 2008). But critical journalism was during the

1940's and 50's more exception than rule. Power holders were treated with great respect and examples of investigative journalism were rare. All this changed during a decade, not at least in news journalism in television. Some leading reporters introduced critical interviewing in the 1960's, which was seen as an ideal by the rapidly growing and mainly younger journalist generation. Self-confidence grew as did the status of journalist work.

To be impartial was seen as being independent as well in relation to the state as to corporate boards and interest groups. Michael Schudson has described how this ideology replaced partisan journalism in North American press. An important conclusion of his review is that the objectivist ideology prevailed as a result of a number of converging factors; among them

- changes in the political landscape
- changes in reporting techniques (mainly more interviews)
- change in professional identity and ethical codes (Schudson 2001).

Professionally it saw its victory during in the other half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. It was 'the emergence of a skeptical, critical, and aggressive accountability journalism dedicated not to partisan triumph but to a sense of public service is in many respects a product of the 1960's and after.' (Schudson 2011).

This breakthrough had to do with a professionalization of the craft, the opening up of the political scene, not least because of the impact of television, and finally strong financial backing that was due to high revenues from advertising (Schudson 2011). The same development was seen in Sweden. During these years Swedish political parties agreed to that journalism should be free to act as a third state in addition to the judicial and legislative power. This was even established in a number of statements (1975, 1994) by the political parties represented in the parliament. During the 1970's this was reinforced when news papers started to receive substantial state financial assistance (tax payers money) with the intention to secure alternative voices all over the country (Hadenius /Weibull/Wadbring 2008, Gustafsson /Rydén 2010).

### **Obstacles to exporting autonomous journalism**

Swedish journalists as well as other journalists in Western Europe and Northern America experience today a period of media insecurity which to some extent is reconstructing the profession. But at the same time Swedish authorities, the journalist union and other actors are involved in development efforts in transition states (sometimes called 'new democracies') and post-conflict states.

Although both concepts are disputed they are used here as they give an acceptable positional picture of the regions or states in focus of the study. In political science a distinction is made between post-conflict states at one side and transition states at another. The main difference is that the former group often lack functioning state apparatus while latter group is in a better position to rebuild authorities. In the group of post-conflict states there is a distinction made between (a) fragile states, (b) crisis states and (c) failed states, depending on the state of the art for state building in the area (Putzel/van der Zwaan 2006).

Many transition states can be considered as post-conflict states as they have gone through or are still strongly influenced by an international or regional conflict. This is the case in former East European countries as Poland, Hungary and former Czechoslovakia, states which were hampered in their democratic aspiration by Soviet military force. Several countries in Asia and Africa are still affected by strong internal tensions severely affecting the media sector, for instance Sri Lanka and South African Republic.

What is the motivation behind the efforts to export journalism? It is a belief fundamentally based on the experiences of media autonomy in Sweden and other states in Western Europe and the United States:

‘Democracy support is an important factor in promoting freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Support for journalistic activities, publishing, free media and access to the Internet and mobile telephony are all important tools for creating conditions in which people can freely seek and impart information.’(...)

‘Independent, critical media are essential to freedom of expression and form an important part of the watchdog functions that distinguish a democratic society. Free, independent media help ensure greater exchange of correct information, improved opportunities for public debate and the exchange of political views and ideas. This can in turn help reduce the risk of conflict and corruption. Moreover, free media have a long-term effect on norms, values and attitudes, as well as on the growth and development of a democratic culture. Journalists are among the most important actors for democratization ‘ (Swedish Foreign Department 2010).

The same objectives are also used by other official development agencies, as United Nations, the British development agency DFID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) as well as by many voluntary organizations and consultant groups, when involved in programs to develop free and fair media arrangements in many states in Africa, Latin America, Asia and former Eastern Europe.

A recent report to OECD/DAC notes:

‘The purpose of support to media within democratic governance varies significantly across agencies. For some, it is explicitly focused on (and results therefore measured against) enhancing domestic accountability, improving service delivery, mitigating risks of violence (e.g. around elections) and other

governance objectives. For others, it is shaped by a broader set of goals designed to promote political freedom, human rights and democracy. For most, a combination of objectives is apparent.’ (Arnold/Odugbemi 2011)

Efforts to create sustainable conditions for autonomous journalism in post-conflict or transition states are countered by strong political and economic forces. The democracy watch organization Freedom House recently made the following alarming statement based upon an annual survey of media independence in 196 countries:

‘After two decades of progress, press freedom is in decline in almost every part of the world. Only 15 percent of the world's citizens live in countries that enjoy a free press. In the rest of the world, governments as well as non-state actors control the viewpoints that reach citizens and brutally repress independent voices who aim to promote accountability, good governance, and economic development’ (Freedom house 2011)

In a comment to its latest report a spokesperson for the organization writes: ‘one in six people - live in countries where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures’ (Karlekar 2011). Freedom House made an assessment of 196 countries and territories during 2010. 68 states (35 percent) were rated ‘free’, 65 (33 percent) were rated ‘partly free’, and 63 (32 percent) were rated ‘not free’. This can be compared with 2009: 69 free, 64 partly free, 63 not free (Karlekar 2011).

There are a few signs in another direction, for instance connection to the rapid changes in Northern Africa, in a few African countries (Niger, Guinea-Conakry, Kenya, Senegal, Zimbabwe), and also in some states in former Eastern Europe (Moldova, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan). But in general the trend is negative. Why? Karlekar points to five main causes:

- State regulatory frameworks are used as key method to control media and limit space for independent media, especially broadcasting. Russia and Venezuela are mentioned among a range of states who try to hinder or suspend broadcasting.
- Comprehensive resources are used to control social media and the internet. Among the techniques are: blocking of satellite television (Egypt and Iran), blocking of Face book (Pakistan briefly) and unavailable in China, Syria, and Vietnam. Increased censorship of the internet in South Korea and Thailand.
- Growing suppression of press freedom by non-state forces. For example by the drug mafia in Mexico and in Guinea-Bissau.

- Violence and physical harassment towards journalists forcing them into self-censorship or exile. Some of the most risky countries for reporters were last year Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Mexico, and Pakistan. Due to Freedom House ‘the failure to punish or even seriously investigate crimes against journalists has reached scandalous proportions’.
- Also threats to media freedom in established democracies, for instance in South Africa and Hungary (new restrictive media legislation) (Karlekar 2011).

In general, institutional problems are reinforced by instability within the states. Journalists have to face a harsh social environment with certain common structural characteristics, among them deep-rooted ethnical divides, weak democratic institutions and lacking legal regulations, poor governance and corruption and criminality.

The problems must be taken into consideration when preconditions for media autonomy are researched. In accordance with Hallin/Mancini (2004), it is fruitful to emphasize four other factors that influence external autonomy:

- the role of government,
- the degree of political governance (political parallelism),
- the development of media markets
- the degree of professionalization.

I would like to add two other societal factors that are of utmost interest. The first is the *development of civil society* and the *other impacts from the international community*. Civil society is means social networks, organizations and institutions made up of citizens outside the state and private sphere. The international community consists of democratic states and also transnational institutions working worldwide, as the United Nations.

**Table: crucial factors for external autonomy**

Role of government	Weak governance Lack of legal protection for independent journalism
Political governance	Often strong political parallelism: mass media used to promote political power
Media market development	Few companies, weak funding, problems with distribution
Professionalization	Low level of journalism education, weak relation to research institutes. None or weak journalist union
Civil society	Few checks on mass media
International actors	Few actors, un-coordinated, few sustainable activities

To try to overcome some of the problems several international donor, among them the United Nations, have committed themselves to support mass media enterprises and journalism. This is part of the development strategy to create stability by promoting democracy, which sometimes is followed by actions in the form of information intervention.

### **The fragility of information intervention**

What motivates an information intervention? What is its strength or weakness? In what ways have different intervening actors contributed to independent and impartial journalism?

It is only recently that democracy-building and media support have been adopted by state leaders, institutions and organizations as central to state reconstruction. During two decades after the Second World War stability was the key concept for state-building in war-torn states as well as in former colonial areas (for a discussion about this topic see Haymann/Manning 2009).

During the cold war support went to actors and governments that favored hegemonic power on each side. Stability was chosen before democracy, although lip service was paid to the latter. This strategy promoted state-leadership of a long row of autocrats, military regimes, one-party states, racist governments and even cleptocratic rulers, all sworn enemies of impartial journalism.

In the 90's, after the demolition of the iron curtain, democracy became a leading concept in international relations, especially for donors. Now the ranking of stability and democracy changed. Among intervening actors and donor states active in Bosnia, Afghanistan, Kosovo and Iraq democratic state building was seen as a pre-requisite for stability, not the other way round. *Human rights* became central to international support.

The changing promotion of human rights had far-reaching consequences for many international actors, among them United Nations. The UN Charter has not been altered but interpreted differently (Barber 2009). Principles of sovereignty and non-intervention were called in question, partly as a result of the dark experiences in Bosnia (Srebrenica) and in Rwanda 1994.

Although not being the central matter, the role of mass media was highlighted in a negative sense. In Rwanda and Bosnia radio stations and newspapers were used as propaganda tools to stir up ethnic violence. The invading forces had these bad examples in mind when they created ethic rules for mass media agencies in

Kosovo and Rwanda and Bosnia were also in the mind of the American administration when it planned for the post-Taliban era in Afghanistan.

It is important to point at the double-edged role of mass media in conflict situations. The credo of quality journalism is a mass media that functions as arena for an informed citizenry. But different actors want to use the media for their purposes: as a forum for directed information often presented as ‘strategic communication’. This type of mass media is useful for stability strategies. Even if not often stated it is (at least) not promoting critical, debating and investigative journalism.

Recently intervening international actors have used mass media channels as this kind of tool for directed information. Information interventions in states like Bosnia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Kosovo are described as parts of humanitarian intervention. In these interventions *Citizen rights*, not the rights of states or state-leaders, were emphasized. The concept ‘human security’ challenged the state sovereignty norm (Hettne/Odén 2002). A growing number of international actors stated that if a government could not protect citizens, then international society has the right to intervene. The *responsibility to protect* legitimized *humanitarian intervention* (Barnett 1995, Mingst 2008) of which information intervention strategies is a vital part.

Information intervention is aiming at (a) countering disinformation from hostile actors (enemies or unwanted regimes) and (b) informing citizens about the purpose of international actions. The goals can be achieved by using direct channels: often carried out by information units, but also by using indirect channels: community information, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and mass media. The Swedish Foreign Department recently stated:

‘In the case of *post-conflict countries* and *new democracies*, it is particularly important to include a diversity of interests. Media that listen and communicate interests can have a conflict-prevention effect in these countries. Tensions between different interest groups will be less if the latter are given the opportunity to express their views; critical media provide some guarantee against attacks against individuals and minorities. Local media can also help reduce isolation in rural areas.’ (Foreign department 2010)

This leads to a central issue of media policy and media ethics; can journalism be completely liberalized in weak states? Is there not a risk that we may get strongly biased journalism that counteracts stability and encourages ethnic tensions?

This question must be answered on a case by case basis. In fragile or crisis states the aim is to create stability and security by ensuring a legitimate state

organization. Efforts to create independent media are complicated as the media then may be used to destabilize the fragile governmental bodies, including the judicial system. A well-reputed research team, gathered by the London School of Economics to discuss strategies in fragile states pointed out that the media support in those states should focus on to 'contribute to specific aspects of state formation, delivery of services, reduction of violence, enhancement of economic activities, strengthen accountability and create increased legitimacy of the political process' (Putzel/van der Zvaan 2006).

How far press freedom can range in fragile states is a delicate issue and not easy to solve. Often it is proposed that a regulation designed to combat hate and slander must be resolved through some type of press ombudsman or if necessary a UN body (Putzel/van der Zvaan 2006). How donors are acting here is of great importance, so that press control does not institutionalize partiality.

Analyzing donor behavior in international intervention Thompson and Price (2002) identifies four approaches for donor media support:

- The first one is use of established international media from intervening states, as was done before the NATO attack on Serbia 1999, for instance by regular radio programs produced by BBC.
- The second approach is about establishing international media enterprises within the area. This was tested in Cambodia during the 90's, positively, as the country lacked free media input. But the same concept did not work in Croatia as the new Croatian leadership 'easily thwarted the UN's attempt to disseminate well-meaning but simplistic propaganda for peace' (ibid.).
- The third approach is about creating local media capacity, which has been tested in a range of countries: Congo, Liberia, Burundi, Rwanda, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka.
- The fourth is supporting existing local media, as was done in both Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Are there any of these strategies which can be preferable? Thompson and Price conclude that the last approach has several advantages:

'Local journalists working for local media in conflict zones earn credibility more easily than outlets set up by the UN or NATO. The purpose of strengthening indigenous media outlet is not only to boost specific kinds of content, but to build professional media that can outlast the intervention that sponsors them and hence strengthen the public sphere and civil society of the target state. Constructing a network independent of the international community would also help to build a pluralist infrastructure, an informed electorate and a heritage of non-partisan information.' (Thompson and Price 2002).

## **Goal conflicts to be overcome in achieving autonomy**

When supporting local media international actors, in cooperation with their local partners, have to cope with several goal conflicts, Goal incompatibilities are different in different areas due to what constitutes the specific social conflict formation, but there are some common features.

At least three goal conflicts can be identified that restrain support to mass media enterprises in a post-conflict states.

The first has to do with allocation of resources, the balance between international and local capabilities. The risk is that too little attention is paid to resources among the local actors.

The second goal-conflict has to do with differences between security and development strategies, between short-term military intervention and long-term democracy-building. The risk is that this goes contrary to the goal of stable peace and sustainable development (Hök 2009, 2010).

The third goal-conflict has to do with role-sharing between different professional groups. Militaries and civilians have historically had very different roles, but during recent expeditions the military has taken on many civilian tasks. Borders between the professions can be blurred and this creates a difficulty to distinguishing military and civilian actors. Several officials in international organizations have opposed the role-sharing with different arguments. Some hold that militaries should stick to their conventional duties, others that the co-operation makes work more risky for aid workers (Barnett/Weiss 2008).

The military has introduced media support as a part of its communication strategy creating an accountability dilemma. It could be defended by the argument that in crisis states and during a short period there is no other resource-strong actor to inform the public. The problem is though that criticism of the intervening parties may be prevented or suppressed. There is a difference of being an information officers and being a journalists.

There is a need for strong pressure from civil society and the international community to support autonomous media in post-conflict and transition states. If not state leadership or other powerful forces will swallow the media arena and use it for their own interests. The outcome will be the opposite of impartial, i.e. biased media. This has also to do with the delicate balance between stability and development. There is always a risk for international actors to favor stability: leading to more military actions and a more closed communication strategy.

This is reinforced during times of financial crises. Development aid activities to promote free media get a smaller amount of the budget. The risk is then that the media companies fall in hand of vested interests, power groups, external powers or local political parties. Both these tendencies have been visible in Afghanistan and Kosovo and also in transition states like Moldova. The outcome is what sometimes has been labeled 'protocol journalism'. Journalists are reporting what the authorities tell them, nearly as a secretary reports a meeting in a protocol. The authorities are seldom questioned and investigative journalism nearly invisible (Limani 2004, Barker 2008, van Zweeden 2007, Taylor 2009, Andresen 2009).

### **Conclusions and suggestions for further research**

The Swedish example shows that the time-span of reaching external as well as internal autonomy for journalists can be long. The emergence of independent journalism, in Schudson's words 'dedicated not to partisan triumph but to a sense of public service' is a phenomenon not more than 50-60 years in the Anglo-saxian journalism as well as in Sweden. It was winning as it had a strong sense of craftsmanship combined with pride of its social mission, it was explicitly authorized by the authorities, it was supported by a strong financial position of the leading media companies and also supported financially by the state. Finally it could use an opening-up of the political scene.

Swedish development aid authorities, the journalist union and other actors are involved in media development efforts in transition states and post-conflict states. The motivation is the belief that it can bring changes in direction of democratization of these societies, based on the experiences in Sweden and other states in Western Europe and the United States.

But many interconnected structural problems are making the export of autonomous journalism difficult. As is shown by case studies in states like Afghanistan and Kosovo, mass media is often used to promote political power (strong political parallelism), media companies are financially weak and seldom supported by tax money, there is limited civil society pressure for the spirit of public service media and international efforts to support independent journalism still suffers from short-sightedness and lack of sustainable coordinated efforts.

Several goal conflicts can be identified that restrain such support to mass media enterprises in post-conflict states. Some of these conflicts have been pointed at in this paper with examples from information interventions by UN and other international forces.

Many of these problems are also present in transition states in former Eastern Europe. The result has been an absence of autonomous journalism as state leaders and other powerful forces have swallowed the media outlets and are using them for their own partisan interests. The outcome has been the opposite to impartial, i.e. biased media, acting according to the vested interest of the usurper.

The development has certainly been different in different countries and research about conditions for autonomous journalism in these countries therefore requires invasive studies in each area.

It is important to stress the necessity to use multi-level analysis. Preconditions can not only be studied in relation to legislation or media owners, it must also be put into a larger context where local (civil society) and international actor efforts are taken into consideration.

This research is highly motivated as there is still no overall picture of the conditions for journalism in post-conflict and transition states and also few studies on international efforts to support autonomous journalism.

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