Evaluating media and communication in development: Does evidence matter?

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For more information on the project, check here.

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Executive Summary (excerpt):

BBC Media Action has made strengthening the evidence base of reports, data sets, and analysis about the role of media and communication in democratic development a priority. Yet, the extent to which different donor organizations, foundations, think tanks, practitioners, and academics utilize research in general and BBC Media Action research in particular, remains uncertain. To shed greater light on this question, in October 2012, the Center for Global Communication Studies at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, conducted a quantitative survey followed by in-depth, structured interviews with 57 development stakeholders from four areas of development: governance, humanitarian response, health, and resilience. These research methods were used to investigate: (1) prevailing perceptions about and uses of media among assorted development stakeholders, (2) the extent to which these stakeholders are familiar with and utilize existing research concerning media development and media for development, (3) if and how funders are using this research to decide funding and policy making priorities, and (4) the specific impact of research and evidence initiated by BBC Media Action.

Key Findings:

I. Uses of and Attitudes Towards Existing Research

• *Differences Across Stakeholders* – Practitioners are less likely than other development stakeholders to consult academic research on the media.

• *Most Popular Information Sources* – Overall the most frequently cited sources for media development information were: The Communication Initiative (CommInit.com), the Center for International Media Assistance, InterMedia, and Internews. When disaggregated according to field, different information sources emerge as prominent: for health, The Lancet; for governance, World Bank resources; and for humanitarian response and resilience, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).

• *Research Should be More Practical, Actionable* – Regardless of their level of familiarity with the available literature, interviewees expressed a desire for relevant research tailored to their areas of interest.There is a relative consensus that existing research is too jargon-laden and impractical. Evidence is most useful when the research findings are translated into clearly–articulated and replicable recommendations for how to adjust and reformulate media programs accordingly.

• *Demand for New Technology Literature* — There is significant interest in evidence regarding the use of ICTs. Interviewees are particularly interested in expanding the evidence base about how and when ICTs can be truly useful in early warnings and disaster relief. Organizations working across the development spectrum are experimenting with social media and other ICT technologies as a means of aggregating information, but are limited by the lack of institutional capacity to appropriately collate and triage the avalanche of new information.

• *Lack of Funding and Support for Incorporating Evidenced-Based Action* —Funding is still lacking for project evaluations. Impact evaluations, counter-factuals, and long-term evaluations are rarely conducted.

II. Uses of Research in Policy and Funding Decision-making

• *Soft Appreciation for the Existing Evidence Base* — On average, the policy community involved in funding media programs consider the available external research and evidence "somewhat useful" and consult the available evidence "sometimes" (average rating 3.2 out of 5, n = 45). Those working in the area of resilience and health are more pleased with strength of the research and evidence base than those working in governance and humanitarian response.

• *Evidence of a Knowledge Gap in the Health Field* — When compared to those working in governance, resilience and humanitarian response, donors in the health field are the most likely to be familiar with and incorporate existing research and evidence into their policymaking and funding priorities. Conversely, practitioners working in the health field are only somewhat engaged with the existing literature. This is problematic because in the health field donor policies are often based on the most up-to-date research.

• *Fluctuations in Funding for Media Programs* — Stakeholders expressed frustration with perceived cycles of media program popularity. Media programs move from the top to the bottom of the funding priority list and then cycle back to the top. This is particularly true in the governance sector. Different types of media programs also tend to come in and out of vogue. Programs that contain some media component rather than media-focused projects are currently perceived to be more fashionable. Not surprisingly, this trend is typified by a focus on incorporating ICT tools into a diverse array of programs.

• *ICTs Seen as a Replacement for the Media Sector* — Many donors feel that traditional media platforms and actors are increasingly anachronistic and see ICTs and new media as a replacement rather than a supplement. There is a corresponding movement away from supporting traditional media organizations and journalism training towards funding the provision of ICTs and other new media tools to target populations.

Introduction:

This research report offers an overview of how different actors working in development – donors, practitioners, think tanks and academics – perceive the role of media in development. It highlights how these actors make use of available evidence on the relationship between media and the fields of governance, humanitarian response, health, and resilience[1] and maps their research needs. It pays particular attention to how these actors perceive and make use of evidence and data provided by BBC Media Action.

The results provide BBC Media Action with guidelines for adding to its evidence base in a way that responds to the needs of the development organizations we interviewed. These recommendations are designed to increase the impact and efficacy of BBC Media Action's research among the disparate development stakeholders currently involved in media development and media for development initiatives. We also provide several generalized findings about the uses of media research among development actors, which add additional insights into the major challenges and opportunities for expanding the impact of BBC Media Action's evidence base.

This report is structured around the four major questions posed by our research:

1. What are the general impressions of development actors regarding the role of media in development?

2. To what extent are development actors using analysis and evidence on the role of media in their activities, and what is their impression of the evidence that exists?

3. To what extent are donors and funders using analysis and evidence in their policy formation and funding priorities?

4. What is the influence of BBC Media Action on the four fields?

In each section we highlight the key findings for each research question, as well as trends and disparities between and across actors working in governance, health, humanitarian response, and resilience. In several sections, humanitarian response and resilience are grouped together for analysis. Many of the organizations we spoke to consider disaster response and disaster risk reduction to be two sides of the same coin, making it more useful to merge respondents' comments on the two categories.

Throughout the report, we refer to "media and communication," often shortened simply to "media" or "communication." As commonly used, these terms are amorphous. For this report, we assume a broad definition of "media" that includes mass communication platforms (e.g., terrestrial television, satellite, radio, newspapers, and print media) as well as newer forms of media (e.g., SMS messaging, blogs, streaming video and audio, RSS feeds, crowd-sourcing applications, and social media

[1] Throughout data collection and analysis, we use definitions of these four fields that correspond to BBC Media Action's framing of the fields. Specifically, the outcomes we concentrate on are: 1) for governance, increased political participation among citizens; accountability of those in power; strengthening of the journalism sector; 2) for health, increased information provided to citizens about health; exploration of health-related beliefs, attitudes, and norms; community participation in health outcomes and health service delivery; 3) for humanitarian response and resilience, provision of information during and after a disaster; coping mechanisms; risk mitigation; disaster preparedness; climate adaptation. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/what_we_do/governance_and_rights. 8

platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). Interviews explored the use of evidence-based action in the practice of media development and media for development. By media development, we mean direct attempts to strengthen the media sector. By media for development we refer to efforts to use various media channels to achieve different development outcomes. References to the "use of media in development" refer to methods of communicating with target populations, or improving the communication capabilities of target populations, in order to achieve development-related outcomes.

Research Question 2: To what extent are development actors using media analysis and evidence in their activities, and what is their impression of the evidence that exists?

A subsection of the interview and survey questions explored respondents' usage of and familiarity with the range of available media analysis and research. In this section, after a brief review of the use of research among the four fields, we present themes regarding areas of research the respondents feel are lacking, and are the most needed to move the fields of media development and media for development forward.

Overview of Responses on the Use of Research by Field

Respondents in the governance, health, and resilience fields seemed to, on average, be aware of and use research on the use of media in development. Respondents in the field of humanitarian response stood out as being less likely to use research and less likely to find the research useful, as seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Frequency of Use and Perceptions of Usefulness of External Media Research, by Field

Respondent	Research – Frequency of Use	Research - Usefulness
Governance (n = 14)	3.5	3.6
Humanitarian Response (n = 14;10)	2.5	2.6
Health (n = 13)	3.4	3.7
Resilience (n = 12;11)	3.2	3.5
Average Across Fields	**3.1**	**3.4**

*Based on the survey response items: "How frequently do you consult external research regarding the role of media and communications platforms in promoting development objectives?" (1 = never; 5 = very frequently) and "How useful to your work have you found research regarding the role of media and communication on development outcomes?" (1 = not useful at all; 5 = very useful).

Governance

Those we spoke with working in governance are currently most interested in issues of social accountability (and the ability of ICTs to improve social accountability) and the ways that ICTs can foster social movements.

Health

Those we spoke with working in health are most interested in improving ways to communicate health information, and in learning how social norms play a role in persuasion and in demand for medical services.

Humanitarian Response

Practitioners and funders are less likely than the other types of actors interviewed to consult the academic literature. For practitioners, this pattern is especially strong for the field of humanitarian response. Those working in humanitarian response were not only the least likely to use research or find

it useful, but were also the *most* critical, of the four fields, of the research that currently exists. Many feel that it does not speak to them, and it does not help them improve their work on the ground.

Resilience

Those working in resilience were engaged with and using the research, but as already stated, the content of the interviews and the interview solicitation process indicate that our sample is not representative of the field.

Like humanitarian response respondents, resilience respondents seem to believe that very little critical and analytical research on the role of media in improving resilience and humanitarian response exists. Marcus Moench, president of the Institute for Social and Environmental Transition (ISET), stated that

> there is a broad literature on early warning systems… but that to me has not connected strongly with the literature on climate responses yet and there's been a big void between the global social attempts around climate change… and something that influences behavior in day to day life. There hasn't been a huge focus between what's out there on climate change and what actually creates behavioral change.

Themes from the Interviews: Gaps in the Research

Practical insights and rigorous, longitudinal evaluations

Complaints about the lack of readable, actionable research were strongest among those in humanitarian response. Several of those we spoke with in humanitarian response, especially practitioners, said that the research simply is not practical, and does not show them explicitly how to incorporate findings into their work. As one respondent expressed it:

> Theoretically it works; you can see the benefits of it. But then when you try and implement it there are a lot of challenges. I think maybe that's where, and I could be very wrong – there might be research out there that looks at the practical: how do you practically integrate media and communications programming into your existing programming?... I mean, my guess is there's not enough of it, probably, because nobody seems to have found it.

James Fahn, who runs Internews' Earth Journalism Network, stated that although he was "sure there is some great research going on," he does not believe it is well translated for those working in the field. "It's very hard to translate the science and the research into laymen's terms so that everyday people can benefit from it." Colin McQuistan, policy adviser on climate change at Practical Action, repeated the sentiment: "a lot of the academic materials require translation… The challenge really is turning the scientific language into something that's meaningful and useable to the people who are implementing projects."

Interviewees across the four fields generally concurred that no organizations are doing a sufficient job of compiling and distributing practical information on the role of media in development.

Sara Rusling, a policy adviser in the AIDS & Reproductive Health Department at DFID stated:

> "I think what we're really looking for is something that brings it all together and makes comparisons between sectors. So what works… around HIV may not be the same as what

works for… hand washing or sanitation behaviors. I've not really seen anything that sort of tries to look across sectors and synthesize what's out there."

Practitioners who were the least familiar with the available research noted a need for reports and information that could concretely facilitate their own use of media. Bob Kitchen, of the International Rescue Committee, would most like to see research about "what works, what's worked for other organizations, and how we can avoid recreating the wheel." Similarly, Jane Cocking, Humanitarian Director at Care International, agreed that "it would be very helpful, I think, to have clearer documented case studies on where responses have been qualitatively better, or worse, or faster…"

Colm Byrne of the Irish Red Cross added that actors involved in delivering humanitarian services, whether traditional NGOs or others, were also part of the problem, and often did not go far enough to measure their own efforts, successes, and failures when communicating with disaster-affected communities:

> The evidence that these efforts are working has not been adequately gathered and analyzed yet, and I think what we're quite poor at – and this goes for all actors responding to humanitarian crises – we're quite poor at demonstrating impact. I think that there is no doubt in my mind that everybody [working in humanitarian response] has gotten caught up and is very excited with the idea of the potential [for communication], but nobody's really had the time and space to reflect and develop it through all that much… I'm not saying it doesn't work and I'm quite sure that it does work, but we need to be sure that it works in the way that we think it works, and that actually requires quite a scientific approach which, in terms of communications, be it initiated by traditional stakeholders, media, or ICT specialists, we need to develop much greater competency in.

Like Byrne, many of those working on the ground highlighted the need for more rigorous evaluations that include pre- and post- intervention indicators to provide evidence on what works and what does not. Respondents believe greater funding is needed for rigorous and long term evaluations that incorporate impact evaluations and counterfactual analyses that advance theory and understanding of how media affect behavior, governance, and other outcomes.

Susan Abbott, Deputy Director of Program Development at Internews, believes another challenge is learning how to come up with appropriate indicators for projects. It is hard for anyone, even academics, to demonstrate an impact of media on societal outcomes. These practitioners need help, perhaps from academics, in designing interventions and baseline evaluations in such a way that the measured indicators can help demonstrate how successful their project has been, or, if it was not successful, highlight potential future improvements.

In addition, most evaluations take place shortly after the termination of the project, which precludes establishing long term effects (or lack of effects) of media interventions. Data on these long term effects may be what are needed to convince donors and practitioners of the importance of media in development. Yet, two institutional factors serve as hurdles to these longitudinal evaluations. First, most donors fail to require or fund longer term evaluations. USAID and other donors reported a rising respect for the importance of monitoring and evaluation activities, yet many still do not require evaluations that measure more than project-level outcomes (such as how many journalists were trained). Second, funding cycles create a disincentive for practitioners to conduct these longitudinal evaluations. As Byrne told us:

> Our funding cycles often tend to be short-term, e.g., annual… and as such we often strive more to provide evidence of change based on what can be most realistically measured within the timeframe to which the funding relates, rather than on the timeframe that is most appropriate, which would be more long-term for non-emergency interventions. If funding cycles were longer-term and we knew that we were going to be around in two or three years' time, we would develop data that would be conducive to that.

In order to strengthen the evidence base of the role of media in development, it seems that more actors need to be convinced, both through evaluations and through convincing and practical reports, that media do in fact have important and lasting effects and outcomes.

Persuasion

As discussed in the previous section, there is a high level of uncertainty among our respondents regarding the appropriate relationship between media and messaging. Several respondents want more information on persuasion. Brett Davidson, Director of the Health Media Initiative at OSF, told us that, with respect to health interventions, they "hear the refrain again and again [from the organizations they fund] that, 'Well we've got all the evidence, but it doesn't seem to change anything."

This may be, in part, because health interventions do not pay sufficient attention to local communities, and to the cultural norms and individual attitudes that work against behavior change. One staff member at UNESCO that we spoke with believes that more research needs to focus on obstacles that make it difficult for any kind of messages to get through. Too many organizations, she argues, believe that 'freedom of expression' regulations will automatically pave the way for people to receive more information, but discount audience selectivity:

> Many experts say that governments are repressive of their media. But they disassociate the government from the society... because nobody speaks of the boundaries of freedom of expression… I've been working on professional capacity enhancement of television producers… and one of the realities that struck me and also shocked me was that women don't always want to receive information on HIV. One of the respondents actually told [one of our reporters] that she would switch off her TV set if anything was spoken about HIV. In some cases it's a taboo, but it's also resistance to receiving information because it works against the cultural "norms" of that specific society.

Joseph Petraglia, Senior Adviser for Behavior Change at Pathfinder, believes an emphasis on "making messages more persuasive" is misdirected, and that persuasion is not "something we can do 'to' audiences." Rather, emphasis needs to be on working with audiences, and making the persuasion process more participatory instead of focusing on the 'informational push', as discussed above.

ICTs

Generally, the interviewees expressed a great amount of excitement about the potential for ICTs to improve the efficacy of their work. Many of the respondents, however, feel that mechanisms for using ICTs in the development context are still in their infancy, as is the research on ICTs. Respondents are eager for more information on how to effectively use ICTs, and feel that there is a dearth of information available on practical application. The following outlines some of the most frequently mentioned challenges regarding ICTs.

1. How to filter / manage information from social media: Many of those interviewed talked about how ICTs – social media in particular – are giving organizations so much information they do not know how to handle it, decipher it, or make the best use of it. In some cases this information overload is merely a challenge – such as how to most effectively use a Facebook page to understand a region's attitudes toward a health problem or toward climate change. For others, particularly those working in disaster relief, this glut of information is more worrisome, undermining their efforts in some extreme cases.

Several groups brought up text messages requesting assistance by disaster victims. Not only is it difficult for disaster response organizations to attend to all of the text messages, but not all of the information is reliable. Volume and credibility problems often undermined triage efforts – helping one person when it might make more sense to help another group in another location. According to Rebecca Gustafson at USAID, "not one" of the social media messages, including text messages, that their search and rescue teams received in the wake of the 2010 Earthquake in Haiti led to a live rescue. Colm Byrne of the Irish Red Cross sees this as one of the key challenges in using ICTs for disaster response: "the problem is not so much information. I think the problem is our challenge to manage that information, to absorb it, to validate it, to use it…" Kathryn Hawley of the Asia Foundation added that, at the institutional level, there is "a whole set of protocols that need to be worked out" before text messaging can be truly useful in early warnings and disaster relief.

Organizations working in this area need more research on how ICTs can be used effectively under such scenarios. Some of the respondents specifically mentioned the Philippines as being ahead of the curve on this front, in part because of their high mobile phone penetration. Peter Walker of Tufts University's Feinstein International Center believes the Philippines are "light years" ahead of the rest of the world in using ICTs for disaster recovery and relief. He told us that

> during a flood in Manila you could tweet [the hashtag #RescueManila] and… your individual tweet may be picked up if it's got certain key words, and this host computer program is analyzing the tweets in real time. The geographical pattern of tweets allows the responding authority to have a more precise knowledge of the way in which the flooding is spreading and developing.

Other respondents mentioned software designers and innovators that are learning how to filter Facebook and Twitter messages, such as Twitcident (Baldwin, 2012)[2]. These respondents are hopeful that their organizations will soon have the capability themselves to use those instruments.

2. How to use new ICT software / platforms: Many of the respondents acknowledged that there are many, many "cool tools," platforms, gadgets, apps, and software programs that have been created to help organizations function better in post-disaster as well as other development scenarios. Colm Byrne of the Irish Red Cross said that software companies can create pretty much any useful tool an organization can dream up. Byrne cautions though, that although tech companies are "ready and eager to create any software development organizations could think of… the pace of advances in ICT is exceeding the capacity of many end-users to keep up – meaning that before we have learned to use one tool effectively, another one comes along." One researcher at the Overseas Development Institute likewise lamented the fact that those

[2] http://twitcident.com/. For recent coverage of the software see: http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2012/04/twitcident-fights-fire-with-twitter/.

coming up with these innovative tools are not pausing long enough to figure out how to make them as useful as possible: "What you read a lot is more the presentation of the tool and what the tool allows you to do, how it's done, etcetera, and not actually how it is concretely used and what it brings in terms of… management on the ground…" Similarly, Galavotti of Care International said she would like to see more on the social and behavioral outcomes that might be addressed with cell phones, but most of the research she sees focuses only on the technology itself.

Vincent Fung, at the UN's Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, said he is excited about the potential for platforms like Esri's ArcGIS software,[3] "but how are communities using it? Are they educating their citizens about landslide risks?" These and many of the other interviewees would like to see more case studies and more research on how these tools actually get used in development contexts, and how they might be applicable for other contexts.

3. Role of ICTs in improving accountability: For many of the respondents, particularly those working in governance, one of the biggest potentials for ICTs is in improving social accountability. By providing the public with information on their government, such as budget information, ICTs can allow citizens to better monitor their leaders. Brett Davidson at OSF described one recent success, in which their organization provided information on medicine stockouts to citizens. The government had been denying that stockouts were happening, but because everyone had access to the information, citizens demanded change, and the government attended to the stockout problem as a direct result of this campaign.

Not all respondents, however, were able to cite such optimistic and concrete evidence of information provision promoting accountability, and many suggested that more research on the relationship between the two is needed. Helena Bjuremalm of International IDEA said her organization is still taking "baby steps" with regard to ICTs and their relationship to accountability. They are trying to understand, among other ICT-related questions, "What are other organizations doing? How do you hold somebody politically accountable for budget decisions?" Olga Gladkikh, at the Coady International Institute, laments the dearth of research on the impact of social media on accountability, empowerment, and social movements: "Where I see gaps in the research is, in fact, in looking at the impact of social media, in particular, on governance outcomes." Guy Grossman, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, agreed that research on the role of ICTs in improving governance "lagged behind… the health [and financial] sectors." He is currently working on a project that allows Ugandan citizens to provide feedback to their representatives in parliament, and therefore hold them accountable for decisions. He acknowledged that

> …one of the things that is coming out [of the research] is this idea that the relationship between information and accountability is more complex. It's not just necessarily that more information will always produce better outcomes. It really depends on - what type of information? Who is the messenger and what is the message? Is the information new? … If they don't know of ways to address the problem, they might not act on behalf of this information.

[3] ArcGIS software compiles geographic knowledge to maps through a crowd-sourcing-type application: http://www.esri.com/software/arcgis.

4. ICTs and social movements / Sociological use of social networks: The range of development actors we spoke with expressed a similar interest in better understanding the sociological underpinnings and theory behind the use and efficacy of social media, as it speaks to issues of social norms, beliefs, and behaviors. Many of the organizations want more information about how social media networks allow social movements to function, transform, spread, and reach critical mass. For example, many are still trying to understand how social media affected the Arab Spring, even though most agree that social media was not the deciding factor.

According to Thomas Tufte of Roskilde University, social movements

> are articulating a lot of new demands on a broader development scale... [This is] an area which is challenging the way civil society and established organizations communicate with their audiences. Now we're getting social movements using new technologies in dynamic ways – ways of mobilizing, ways of organizing – that we're not used to… So this is an area which is going to influence, maybe, our way of thinking… and I think social movement media, social movement theory – I think that's an area of research which is interesting to look into right now.

Similarly, Florencio Ceballos, of the International Development Research Center, would like to see more research on media "as a catalyst for new civil movements."

5. Merging of old and new media: Regarding ICTs overall, most organizations still seem to see more value in traditional media than in new technologies, with ICTs having high, but not yet thoroughly developed potential. The general sentiment across the interviewees was that traditional media are still the primary way to get information to most populations, and we should not become too optimistic about ICTs just yet. There is still not enough information on how these technologies can be used, and in some cases the technology has developed faster than what makes sense given the infrastructure in many countries. As one think tank researcher stated:

> It's quite impressive what can be done, but I think perhaps we get a little over-optimistic about the possibility for a quick fix, and I guess I have some skepticism about the extent to which these tools can be very helpful in countries that are much less advanced in terms of access to technology and where patterns of access to technology are highly inequitable.

At this point, ICTs seem to function best as a complement to, rather than as a replacement for, traditional media sources. Many have found that audiences are more likely to receive information via radio rather than SMS. Therefore, as Tufte stated, one of the important things to look at now is "the dynamics created between new and old." The most frequently cited melding of the old and new was SMS technology coupled with radio programs. Many organizations are using SMS texting to radio stations as a way to make radio, a traditionally one-way form of communication, into a more interactive, feedback-based, two-way communication platform.

With regard to representation of analysis and evidence, we heard a desire both for more case studies and for more systematic reviews with generalizable recommendations, including meta-reviews. Lori McDougall, of the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, based at WHO, stated that, although meta-reviews are sorely needed in order to present convincing evidence on the role of media, most meta-reviews focus on random-controlled trials (RCTs), and there simply are not very many RCTs happening in the development context.

References

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