

# Report for Media Development Researchers Conference

January 25, 2010  
New York, New York

## **Introduction**

In an effort to foster collaboration among media researchers, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and OSI sponsored [The Media Development Researchers Conference](#) in New York in late January. Many donors who support—or could support—media development are unaware of current research or how best to take advantage of it. By gathering researchers and donors together, the meeting aimed to move beyond a technical conversation and come up with ways to better share findings and to spur collaboration among researchers.

By most measures, the conference was a success in meeting those goals. In a survey after the gathering, fifty-eight percent of attendees said that they are very likely to have greater access to research data. Fifty-eight percent also said they are very likely to collaborate more actively with others.

Salzburg Global Seminar and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) organized the meeting of 36 representatives from four principal sectors:

- research and academic institutions
- private foundations
- government donors and the World Bank
- media development groups

A series of panel discussions highlighted important issues such as:

- new trends in research
- the practical applications of research
- media's role in advancing broader development goals
- donors' perspectives on "returns on research investments"
- a future roadmap for research

## **Overview**

A wide variety of institutions conduct media research. University programs count among the major players, but so do government institutions and media development organizations. The participants pinpointed some key challenges:

- Media development research is, by definition, inter-disciplinary and spread over various academic departments and research disciplines such as economics, law, and government.

Media research is not easily searchable. Research is published in many different formats, from obscure academic journals to blogs. No single institution houses this archive. Researchers have difficulty consulting with each other even though collaboration would reduce duplication and enhance results. The professional organizations that exist tend to focus on either broad media research or broad development research. For example, the Committee to Protect Journalists conducts global research on press freedom, while the World Bank Institute considers media research within the context of a broader development agenda. Either way, the narrower field of media development tends to get lost.

- Organizations that work in the field of media development are not aware of all the research available. There tends to be little communication between researchers carrying out these studies. Discussions at the conference focused on new ways to communicate research results more effectively to policymakers, donors and program implementers.
- Much of the existing research is oriented towards the U.S. and European markets, and carried out in the North by institutions based in those regions. Some organizations have begun research on Africa and the Middle East, but it still accounts for a tiny fraction of the overall research on the impact of media on society. Other regions struggle to adapt Western research to very different cultural, political and economic settings.
- Much of the research is available only in English, limiting its utility in some parts of the world.
- Some major disciplines are largely missing from the media research community, notably development economics, the study of the economic aspects of development.

### Categories of Research

Before the gathering, the participants submitted examples of the kind of work they were focusing on. ICFJ coded the research and put it on the Media Development Researcher site on IJNet. The research fell into the following categories:

1. Digital Media (9)
2. Access to Information (7)
3. Broadcasting (5)
4. Good Governance (5)
5. Media Development (5)
6. Development Policy (4)
7. Networked Journalism (4)
8. Post-conflict (3)
9. Citizen Journalism (2)
10. Gender Issues (2)
11. Journalism Education (2)
12. Monitoring & Evaluation (2)

Guy Berger from Rhodes University suggested the addition of the following topics:

- Media law
- Media economy
- Media ownership
- Protection of journalists and freedom of expression
- Media literacy and media consumption
- Humanitarian media

At the same time, Gerry Power from the BBC cautioned against designating too many topics. Power suggested grouping the categories under levels of participation in the media development process, such as studies relating to audience, organization, and practitioner.

### Existing Resources

Some organizations are now starting to gather research on media development. Although many universities and implementers publish their own work, there are few aggregators that attempt to organize and publish global, cross-sector research. They include:

- **The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA)** at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), publishers of many important reports. CIMA has also created a major searchable database of books, papers and other academic resources on media development: <http://geniehost25.inmagic.com/dbtw-wpd/searchMediaBib.html>
- **The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ)** launched a research section on its website, IJNet: It's searchable and easy to navigate but will require additional resources to keep going. [www.mediadevelopmentresearch.com](http://www.mediadevelopmentresearch.com)

Since the Web site's launch on January 20, the site has received nearly 1,400 absolute unique visitors and over 3,600 unique views. Those visiting the site came from around the world, with the U.S (357 visits) and the U.K (174), topping the list. They were followed by Egypt (108), Portugal (85) and India (83).

Participants also pointed out that three major academic associations conduct and coordinate media research:

- **The International Communications Association** <http://www.icahdq.org/> (with a principally North American membership)
- **The International Association for Communications Research** <http://iamcr.org/> (principally outside North America)
- **The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication** <http://www.aejmc.org/>

There are also a number of organizations whose work has strong implications for media development, such as World Public Opinion ([www.worldpublicopinion.org](http://www.worldpublicopinion.org)), a consortium of research centers that monitors public opinion on international issues in over 25 countries.

There was consensus at the meeting that the field is expanding faster than the research can be conducted. Some new research topics include:

- new business models for journalism,
- the impact of social media, the cultural context of media,
- the global transition from analog to digital broadcasting, and
- the relationship between media and political and economic development.

The participants also recognized that there is scant research on some major regions of the world, particularly China. Guy Berger of Rhodes University offered a number of suggestions to improve media research:

1. The foundation community should create an **annual prize** for the most valuable research contribution to media development
2. Development groups should commission and fund more research to fill gaps.
3. There should be peer review mechanisms at the design and output stages.
4. Organizations should commit to sharing research results and placing them online at the outset of the project.
5. The community should pay more attention to elaborated metadata to disseminate new research.
6. Key findings should be publicized on sites such as the Toronto-based Communications Initiative's [www.comminit.com](http://www.comminit.com) and the Catholic Media Council's <http://www.mediame-wiki.net/>

### Indicators

Participants agreed that there was some very valuable quantitative research, especially the IREX Media Sustainability Index (MSI). They emphasized that IREX's Index was an excellent "starting point." IREX has funding to survey only 71 countries, leaving out critical parts of the world. Also, its indicators need to be updated to include more new media components.

Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, and the Committee to Protect Journalists also produce valuable quantitative research relating to press freedom.

Freedom House representative Karin Karlekar said funding pressures mean cutbacks in research. Intermedia's Peter *Goldstein* described AudienceScapes, a pilot project including extensive

audience research in three countries in Africa. (It is uncertain whether there will be future resources to expand the research to other countries.)

Business schools and private research groups also conduct quantitative research, but participants said that it is often difficult to get access to this material. Some of the research is sponsored by governments that seek to withhold potentially destabilizing or negative information or by agencies under pressure from their donors to demonstrate a self-sustaining business model. Organizations may present research to suggest income flows that may not in fact sustain their operations, in hopes of improving their chances for receiving further grants.

### The Impact of Research

There was ample anecdotal evidence that programs using good research can be highly effective. Some examples:

- On a local level, the BBC World Service Trust call-in radio program in Africa collected evidence unclear what's going on resulted in electricity being restored to an impoverished urban area for the first time in 30 years.
- On a national level, a media law research project conducted at Palermo University in Argentina resulted in a Chilean Congressional initiative to reform the law.
- On an international level, USAID recently released a study using media development indicators to correlate spending on media development with progress in economic development. The study compared outcomes of investments in media development to other areas of spending, such as human rights. The study served to bolster the case for Congressional funding by reflecting positive outcomes in the area of media development. (The research, conducted by the University of Pittsburgh and Vanderbilt University, is available online: [SORA\\_FinalReport\\_June08\\_508c.pdf](#))

At the same time, the participants agreed that more “longitudinal” research is needed that is tracked and studied over time. They stressed the importance of developing strong local research capability, especially in countries where there are investments in bolstering the media. Local researchers need to be better trained and their operations independent of government or monopolistic control. These conditions are not always easy to find or to engineer.

### Challenges

The day's discussions confirmed some of the biggest and most immediate challenges ahead:

- Creating synergies between researchers and between universities.
- Reducing duplication.
- Creating more efficient online sharing and communication

- Redefining the metrics used in monitoring and evaluating media projects and their impact on government and society.
- Advancing the development of databases and mapping tools, and enhancing online search functions.
- Distributing the research to media development and media organizations through the Global Forum for Media Development, as well as other organizations.

Participants agreed that the conference was a small but important step forward in a complex field. They expressed appreciation to OSI and the Knight Foundation for sponsoring the meeting, and to the Salzburg Global Seminar and ICFJ for organizing it.

One of the discussion's broad conclusions was that current research is too fragmented. The challenges ahead include not just conducting research of a higher quality, but also achieving new levels of coordination, with a goal of linking research and practice.

**One outcome:** the creation of a committee to define appropriate categories of media research, and decide where best to house the research. Volunteers included Marguerite Sullivan of CIMA/NED; Charlie Beckett of POLIS/LSE; Karin Karlekar of Freedom House; Bettina Peters of GFMD; and Gerry Power of the BBC WST. (To be confirmed)

Additional material on the meeting can be found on the following blogs:

Guy Berger/New Media Lab <http://nml.ru.ac.za/blog/guy-berger/2010/01/28/media-development-industry-meets-media-research.html/>

Anne Nelson/PBS MediaShift: <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/anne-nelson/>