

The No-Nonsense *guide to* Media Observatories, Good Governance, and Good Citizenship

What are media observatories? What do they do? How do they contribute to better democracy, greater accountability, and social justice?

Media observatories help advance good governance, good citizenship, and democracy. Ignacio Ramonet, editor-in-chief of *Le Monde Diplomatique* (1991-2008) proposed the creation of Media Watch Global¹ – of which he is currently President – as a counterbalance to a world in which information is concentrated in fewer hands and global media increasingly subject to political and commercial interests.

Ramonet argued that globalization has resulted in the mass media no longer acting as the traditional ‘fourth estate’ committed to good governance and good citizenship. The media are no longer interested in ‘correcting the malfunctions of democracy and creating a better political system... even less in acting as a countervailing power.’²

In essence, Ramonet was lamenting a decline in public service media that, broadly speaking, seek to sustain citizenship and civil society through promoting education and learning and stimulating creativity and cultural excellence.

Public service media are an important source of unbiased information and diverse political and cultural opinion. They function under rigorous editorial standards of objectivity, fairness, and independence from party political or economic interference.

Clearly, public service media should be subject to higher public scrutiny and accountability for their programming than commercial broadcasters and they should provide free access to informal education and culture.

And, crucially, public service media have an obligation within defined limits to serve minority communities and people with special needs who might miss out in a purely commercial market. Public service media should, therefore, support non-commercial objectives such as democratic processes, social progress, intercultural understanding, and societal integration.

When media fail to fulfil their public service function, there is a need for reform and, in this regard, Ramonet sees an initiative such as Media Watch



Media observers in Turkey study national newspapers during the Global Media Monitoring Project 2005.

Global (MWG) as a moral enterprise. Its aim is to judge media honesty on the basis of ethics, and to seek to remedy media shortcomings through reports and studies which it independently prepares, publishes and distributes.

In such a way, MWG exercises collective responsibility in the name of citizens’ right to inform and to be properly informed:

‘One of humanity’s most precious rights is the right to communicate freely its thoughts and opinions. No law should be allowed arbitrarily to restrict press freedom and the freedom of speech. But these freedoms can only be exercised by media enterprises if they do not infringe other rights that are equally sacred, such as the right of each citizen to have access to uncontaminated news. Under the pretext of freedom of expression, media enterprises should not be allowed to disseminate false news, or conduct campaigns of ideological propaganda.’²

More recently, Ramonet discussed the metaphor of the ownership of vast tracts of land (*latifundio*) in relation to media ownership and control in Latin America, which in many countries is in the hands of a few media conglomerates or families. In Mexico and Brazil, the Televisa and Globo companies respectively,

have dominated the media for decades. Closely associated with authoritarian governments, both companies have consolidated their control and hold extensive interests in television, film, newspapers, music, radio and other industries.

Media markets elsewhere are effectively duopolies: Argentina (Grupo Clarín and Telefónica), Colombia (Grupo Santo Domingo and Grupo Ardilla Lule), and Venezuela (Grupo Phelps and Grupo Cisneros). Ramonet observed that:

‘In a democracy, when one sector alone has too much power, in whatever area of life but above all in the life of the economy or the media, it’s obvious that an imbalance is created – because the economy is all-important and the media create public opinion and, therefore, have an impact on democracy. If a few families simultaneously hold a significant portion of economic power and a major part of media power, a force is being created that is going to oppose any reforms aimed at greater balance.’³

Media reform encourages diversity and the proliferation of sources of content that are not controlled by the private or business sector or by the State. Media reform can be spurred on by the work of media observatories. Not surprisingly they have sprung up in many parts of the world – notably Latin America, where there is now a continent-wide network dedicated to fundamental notions of freedom of expression, freedom of information, the right to citizenship, and the right to participatory democracy.⁴

IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA TO ACHIEVING SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality prepared by Article 19 and published in April 2009 affirm the importance of the media and other means of public communication to enabling free expression and realizing social equality. The Principles recognize that:

‘Freedom of expression and equality enhance the growth and vitality of civil society organizations which in turn give voice and visibility to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and strive towards the protection of their rights.’⁵

Principle 5 articulates ‘The right to be heard and the right to speak’ in terms of a public policy and regulatory framework for media which promotes pluralism and equality. That framework should:

- Respect the principle that any regulation of the

media should only be undertaken by bodies which are independent of the government, publicly accountable, and which operate transparently

- Promote the right of different communities to freely access and use media and information and communication technologies for the production and circulation of their own content.
- Implementation of the framework includes:
- Promoting universal and affordable access to the means of communication and reception of media services
 - Allocating sufficient ‘space’ to broadcasting uses to ensure that the public is able to receive a range of diverse broadcasting services
 - Making an equitable allocation of resources among public service, commercial and community media
 - Putting in place effective measures to prevent undue concentration of media ownership
 - Providing public support for the provision of reliable, pluralist and timely information for all and content which makes an important contribution to diversity or which promotes dialogue among different communities
 - Ensuring that disadvantaged and excluded groups have equitable access to media resources including training opportunities
 - Protecting and enhancing public service values in the media.

Media observatories monitor all of the above and more. Their purpose is to study and analyse mass media content with the aim of safeguarding the quality of news and information, observance of people’s rights to communication, freedom of information and expression, access to news and information sources, pluralism, and citizens’ participation in the media.

Media observatories help improve journalistic coverage of issues that are vital to democracy and participatory development, such as good governance, good citizenship, and issues affecting marginalized people and communities.

The upsurge in observatories is a phenomenon provoked by a loss of credibility in conventional media and by a growing public demand for critical insights that provide people with a firm basis on which to evaluate the information provided by the media. The following list offers some examples of work being done.

EXAMPLES OF MEDIA OBSERVATORIES WORLDWIDE

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) (USA)

<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=100>

FAIR, a national media watch group, has been offering

well-documented criticism of media bias and censorship since 1986. It works to invigorate the U.S.'s First Amendment by advocating greater diversity in the press and by scrutinizing media practices that marginalize public interest, minority and dissenting viewpoints. As an anti-censorship organization, it exposes neglected news stories and defends working journalists when they are muzzled. FAIR believes that structural reform is ultimately needed to break up the dominant media conglomerates, establish independent public broadcasting and promote strong non-profit sources of information. FAIR maintains regular dialogue with reporters at news outlets across the U.S.A., providing constructive critiques when called for and applauding exceptional, hard-hitting journalism. It also encourages the public to contact media with their concerns, to become media activists rather than passive consumers of news.

The Hoot (India)

<http://www.thehoot.org/web/home/index.php>

The Hoot is website created under the auspices of the Media Foundation. Its rationale is that while India has plenty of media, it does not have enough scrutiny of the media. The Hoot portal is an attempt to revive a concern for media ethics, restore focus on development in the subcontinent, and preserve press freedom. It attempts to hold up a mirror to the way journalists practice their craft in the region. It is devoted to examining issues of accuracy, fairness, right to information, censorship, and the responsibility of the media. It is aimed at journalists, users of the media including lay readers and viewers, and students and teachers of journalism and communications. Particularly for the last group, as for media professionals, it attempts to bring together several relevant links and readings and to provide tools for communities and individuals to interact with the media.

Campaign for Democratic Media (CDM) (Canada)

<http://http://democraticmedia.ca/front>

CDM is a network of public interest organizations and people pushing for media democracy. Since 2008 a diverse array of groups and individuals across Canada has been building a new organization to support the development of a truly democratic media system. CDM is a network-structured, education- and campaign- oriented, movement-building, national, non-profit and non-partisan media reform organization. It is primarily interested in helping to create the conditions for diverse, accountable and quality Canadian media to thrive. Its primary goal is to increase public awareness and informed participation in Canadian media policy formation. Participants in this emerging network include civil society organizations, consumer organizations, labour groups, media advocacy groups,

academics, grassroots media activists, and Canadians from across the country.

Gender Links (South Africa)

<http://www.genderlinks.org.za>

Formed in 2001, Gender Links began its work with a strong focus on promoting gender equality in and through the media. This work has two facets: research, training and advocacy for achieving greater gender sensitivity and balance within the media and in its editorial content; as well as strategic communication skills for gender activists and women in decision-making to better access and influence media content. Over time, that media focus has expanded to include work in the broader field of gender and governance. Pioneering work on developing strategic communications campaigns linked to the Sixteen Days of Activism on Gender violence has also grown to include initiatives to ensure sustained, year-long campaigns for ending gender violence. One of the main functions of the Gender and Media Networks is to raise alerts about gender injustices, and sexist coverage in the media. These Networks also issue report cards on media performance. Information is shared through E-Talk and a monthly newsletter.

Observatoire pour la liberté de presse, d'édition et de creation en Tunisie (Observatory for the Freedom of Press, Publishing and Creation in Tunisia) (OLPEC)

<http://www.observatoire-olpec.org/1ere%20page%20EN.html>

In 2007 an observatory to monitor the state of press freedom and to document the social and professional conditions of journalists throughout the Arab world was opened in Rabat by the Federation of Arab Journalists' (FAJ). The observatory was to be run on behalf of the FAJ by the Syndicat National de la Presse Marocaine. It was intended to provide instant and extensive information on events and activities concerning Arab journalists and to publish reports and statistics, commission surveys and undertake studies on all aspects of journalism in the Arab world. The opening of the observatory coincided with the release of the report *Breaking the Chains* published by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) on the problems facing media and journalists in the Middle East.

Asociación para el Desarrollo, Organización, Servicios y Estudios Socioculturales (DOSES) (Association for Sociocultural Development, Organization, Services and Studies) (Guatemala)

<http://www.dosesagua.org>

DOSES is a non-governmental, not-for-profit entity established in 2001 and made up of journalists. Its mission is researching the social effects produced by the mass media, fulfilling the media watchdog function

of citizens, and developing projects aimed at improving the quality of journalism in Guatemala so that the media genuinely contribute to social and democratic development. In its work, DOSES has promoted two observatories: La Nana (Grandma), which monitors the media in relation to the rights of children and adolescents, and Women and Media, which builds awareness among journalists of the need to incorporate a gender emphasis in news coverage.

Veeduría Ciudadana de la Comunicación Social (Citizens' Media Watchdog) (Peru)

<http://www.veeduría.org.pe>

Calandria has been carrying out media studies since 1996. The centralising of news, exclusion of the provinces from the public agenda, and inequality of women and young people as subjects of opinion are some of the problems addressed by monitoring. In 1999 Calandria set up a media observatory for citizens to monitor and debate with the media questions of ethics and development. Its activities are carried out by means of a Network of Communication Volunteers comprising communicators and students of mass media throughout Peru. As well as generating equitable initiatives for dialogue between media and citizens, the Watchdog's aims are to evaluate the quality and public role of the media and to contribute to better education for Peruvian society through the media.

Observatorio de Medios Fucatel (Chile)

<http://www.observatoriofucatel.cl>

The Fucatel Media Observatory is an independent study centre whose main purpose is to reflect on social change and the public impact of the media in modern democratic societies. It organizes the annual 'conversatory' Provocations and occasional round-table dialogues on communication issues such as the impact of digital television. Studies carried out by Fucatel include 'Images and perceptions of the Chilean press: Newspapers according to their readers'.

Observatorio de Prensa de Brasil (Brazil's Press Observatory)

<http://observatorio.ultimosegundo.ig.com.br>

Brazil's Press Observatory is an initiative of the Institute for Journalism Development and a project of the Laboratory for Advanced Journalism Studies of the State University of Campinas. It defines itself as a journalistic vehicle focused on critiquing the media using the Internet as a medium of diffusion. The Observatory runs the blog 'Latin American Colloquium on Observing the Media', a platform for sharing experiences, studies and information among organizations working in the field of media monitoring in Brazil and on the continent.



Radio and television broadcasting are also covered by media observatories - in this case in the Philippines.

Observatorio Nacional de Medios (National Media Observatory) ONADEM (Bolivia)

<http://www.unirbolivia.org>

ONADEM originated in the UNIR foundation, established in 2004 with the objective of generating spaces for information, negotiation, deliberation and dialogue among Bolivians working for participation, interculturality and equality. UNIR's information unit, where the observatory was set up, tries to improve transparency, quality and access to information about difficult themes (coca, health, education, hydrocarbons, etc.) and about the democratic process. The Observatory follows, analyses, and evaluates media content in order to socialize it and to create greater self-critical awareness in the media and among journalists. It seeks to encourage quality news, transparency of media ownership, and to study telecommunications legislation.

Red Andi América Latina (ANDI Latin America Network)

<http://www.redandi.org>

The ANDI Latin America Network is made up of 12 news agencies for children's rights that are committed to using communication for human and social development and especially to promote the rights of children and adolescents. Each is a non-governmental entity representing a Latin American country and is responsible for carrying out a series of strategic actions based on a methodology created, approved and consolidated by ANDI - News Agency for Children's Rights - in Brazil. Each entity works like a news agency that does not produce news, but mobilizes and trains journalists, monitors the media, produces guidelines on strategic issues and organizes sources of information and data on themes affecting childhood.

Instituto de Investigación de Medios (Media Research Institute) (Argentina)

<http://www.crin.org/organisations/vieworg.asp?id=3007>

The Institute's aim is to promote human and social development based on scientific research and the transfer of knowledge in order to respond to the many problems of our times. Its line of action is mass media research through research networks that contribute to creating policies for Latin American media. It also trains for community mobilization, produces media content and educational materials. In addition to the International Research Forum on Media and Infancy, its activities include the use of street musicians in schools and to mobilize communities around themes related to communication, social inclusion and literacy projects for street children using videogames.

Fundación GAMMA (Ecuador)

<http://www.gammaecuador.org/home.php>

The GAMMA Foundation seeks to strengthen human relationships through greater understanding of global responsibilities. In particular it works to unmask the habits of cultural patriarchy so that people and society cease to accept as natural facts situations of discrimination, subordination, exclusion and violence. It also seeks to lay the foundations of a cultural matrix in which people and society can fully develop and live. GAMMA works in the following areas: training and communication; research and systematization; social therapy to heal trauma; assistance in monitoring, following, executing and evaluating development projects. Its axis revolves around the perspectives of gender and human rights. GAMMA also organizes the Observatorio Ciudadano de la Comunicación (Citizen's Communication Observatory) aimed at increasing equality of opportunities between women and men.

Ibero-American Observatory on Television Fiction (OBITEL)

Created in 2005 in Colombia, OBITEL is composed of eight national groups of researchers (based in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Spain, the USA, Mexico, Portugal and Uruguay) who carry out systematic monitoring of fiction shows broadcast on open television channels in their respective countries. The Observatory's goal is to foster scholarly research on television fiction, to contribute to education and production in this area, and to collaborate on leveraging television policies. In addition, OBITEL aims to shed light on the cultural and political dimensions of contemporary international relations through the demands of recognition of belonging and of the right to alterity. Since 2007 OBITEL has published a Yearbook detailing its work. In 2009 it was called *Television fiction in Ibero-America:*

Narratives, formats and advertising (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Globo. ISBN 978-85-250-4702-1).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP)

<http://www.whomakesthenews.org/>

What would the world's news look like if it were gender responsive? What would it look like if it were contributing to gender equality?

The media have an enormous potential as agents of change for gender equality and women's empowerment. They are a pervasive central source of cultural patterns and social values. In too many countries, they reflect and reinforce gender injustice. In both overt and subtle ways, they also often perpetuate negative stereotypical representations of girls and women that in turn influence and reinforce gender-based discrimination. This can be said of both the entertainment and news media output.

If there were gender equality in the media, the media environment would look different. Not only would we no longer see gender based stereotyping, but perhaps even more importantly we would see a massive increase in representation of the lives and concerns of women, and women's opinions and viewpoints. In brief, the media are a site and a source of gender inequality.

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is the largest and longest grassroots media monitoring, longitudinal research project on gender representation in news media across the world. It is also the largest advocacy initiative in the world on changing the representation of women in the media. In 1994, the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) along with ISIS Manila and the International Women's Tribute Centre organised the 'Women Empowering Communication' conference in Bangkok which played a large part in galvanising support for official recognition of issues related to women and the media in Section J of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action.

It was at the Bangkok conference that the idea for a one-day study of the representation and portrayal of women in the media was conceived. The idea was inspired by the concern of women activists to bring the issue of media accountability to the forefront of debate on gender inequalities. The first global day of media monitoring was coordinated by the Canadian NGO Media Watch with support from WACC and others, and the report was launched at the Women's NGO Forum in Beijing in September 1995.

Every five years since then another GMMP has taken place to contest news media representations of gender which contribute to maintaining, reproducing stereotypes and increasing marginalization and discrimination on the basis of gender. The GMMP also

serves to strengthen and expand a network of civil society organizations working in the area of ‘gender and media’

The GMMP has shown that news stories are more than twice as likely to reinforce gender stereotypes as to challenge them. Blatant stereotyping is alive and well in news reporting around the world. This goes far beyond the gratuitous display of female flesh (women are considerably more likely to appear in photographs than men): Many news reports use language and images that reinforce gender stereotypes in subtle ways. These stories usually embody unstated assumptions about the roles of women and men – assumptions that are hidden in the choice of language and images and by the emphasis that is placed on certain aspects of male or female experience.

TOWARDS GOOD GOVERNANCE AND GOOD CITIZENSHIP

A democratic society needs democratic media. This axiom bears repetition, especially as it implies the kind of ‘communicative citizenship’ that philosopher Jesús Martín-Barbero finds indispensable if people are to participate meaningfully in decisions affecting their lives. A communicative citizenship enables its members to see, read, and hear critically, and it also enables them to be seen, read, and heard. A communicative citizenship is fundamentally inclusive. To avoid exclusion, it is essential to monitor the media in terms of their role as powerful arbiters of information, knowledge, awareness, and socio-cultural behaviour.

But achieving social justice is not easy. As communication researcher Luis Ramiro Beltrán points out:

‘The global power opposed to just change is of colossal magnitude and, doubtless, we must anticipate that it will put up enormous, steely, and tenacious resistance to the establishment of new policies to democratize information, communication and culture. Therefore, a terrible challenge confronts the proponents of change and only broad and sustained action in solidarity with each other can equip them to go into action with expectations of a good outcome.’⁶

The work of media observatories helps equip civil society organizations to sensitize those respon-

sible for mass media content to the need to lend their weight to countering imbalances in the media and to advancing good governance and good citizenship. ■

Notes

1. See <http://www.mwglocal.org/>
2. ‘Set the media free’ by Ignacio Ramonet. *Le Monde diplomatique* English Edition (October 2003). <http://mondediplo.com/2003/10/01media>
3. Interview with Ignacio Ramonet, ‘El latifundio de la información es una excelente metáfora’. 2 June 2009. Radio Nederland. <http://www.rnw.nl/es/esp%C3%B1ol/article/el-latifundio-de-la-informaci%C3%B3n-es-una-excelente-met%C3%A1fora>
4. Red Latinoamericana de Observatorios de Medios de Comunicación.
5. <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/standards/the-camden-principles-on-freedom-of-expression-and-equality.pdf>
6. Luis Ramiro Beltrán. ‘Debemos denunciar la estructura deshumanizante y anunciar la estructura humanizante.’ Interview with Juçara Brittes. In *Chasqui*, No. 105 – March 2009.

This No-Nonsense Guide is a resource compiled by Philip Lee and published by the World Association for Christian Communication (2009).

The World Association for Christian Communication (WACC)

promotes communication for social change. It believes that communication is a basic human right that defines people’s common humanity, strengthens cultures, enables participation, creates community, and challenges tyranny and oppression.

WACC’s key concerns are media diversity, equal and affordable access to communication and knowledge, media and gender justice, and the relationship between communication and power. It tackles these through advocacy, education, training, and the creation and sharing of knowledge.

WACC also runs the Centre for Communication Rights portal – a source of documents and materials about all aspects of communication rights.

www.centreforcommunicationrights.org

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www.waccglobal.org

WACC



taking sides