

# What We Have Learned Recently About Country-Level Measures of Media Freedom

## A Short Memorandum

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## **Conceptualization**

Both the Freedom House and the Reporters without Borders measures of press freedom come from the world of media advocacy. Freedom House, a non-governmental organization based in Washington, D.C., was founded in 1941 to promote democracy globally. Since 1978, Freedom House has published its global survey of freedom, known as Freedom in the World. Reporters without Borders, based in Paris, defends journalists and media outlets by condemning attacks on press freedom worldwide, by publishing a variety of annual and special reports on media freedom, and by appealing to governments and international organizations on behalf of journalists and media organizations. Since 2002, the organization has released annually a Worldwide Press Freedom report and ranking of individual nations.

Neither organization provides much by way of a conceptualization of the concept of press freedom. Freedom House says the concept is linked to Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 holds that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media. (Freedom House, 2008). Freedom House says it seeks to provide a picture of the entire “enabling environment” in which the media in each country operate and to assess the degree of news and information diversity available to the public in any given country, from either local or transnational sources. Reporters without Borders (2008) says its measure reflects the degree of freedom that journalists and news organizations enjoy in each country and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom.

A third organization, the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), has a more academic background. It was founded in 1968 by U.S. universities to promote exchanges with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. A non-profit organization based in Washington, D.C., IREX focuses on higher education, independent media, Internet development, and civil society in the United States and internationally. In 2001, IREX, in cooperation with USAID, prepared its first Media Sustainability Index (MSI) to evaluate the global development of independent media (IREX, 2001). IREX (2008) says its Sustainability Index assesses the development of independent media systems. Sustainability is defined as the extent to which political, legal, social, and economic circumstances and institutions, as well as professional standards within independent media, promote and/or permit independent media to survive over time.

### **Usefulness of Indicators as Measured**

In our earlier work we focused on the internal and across time reliability of the Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and IREX measures, on the internal consistency of the components of the Freedom House and IREX measures, on the relationships among those three measures, and on the ability of the Freedom House measures to identify dramatic changes across time (Becker, Vlad & Nusser, 2007). We found that the measures were reliable across time, that they were internally consistent, that they largely measure the same concept or at least highly correlated concepts, and that the Freedom House measures reflected the major changes in the media environment associated with the collapse of communism in eastern and central Europe in the last decade of the last century. Those analyses largely ended with data collected in 2003. We have now extended those analyses to data collected and reported to the end of 2008 (Becker & Vlad, 2009). We focused again on reliability across time and on the interrelationships among the Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and IREX measures.

The Freedom House measures of Press Freedom stretch across 28 years. The measures should be relatively consistent year-to-year, when changes are expected to be slight, and less consistent across time, when changes are expected to accumulate. The average correlation year-to-year for the Freedom House measures is .96 (Pearson  $r$ ). By tracking the score for an individual year across time, however, it is possible to see that the Freedom House measures are not static. The correlation between the measure of Press Freedom in 1980, when the scores were first used, with 1981, was .92. The correlation between the 1981 measure and the 2008 measure, however, was .57. This is true across time. The 1993 measure correlates .94 with the 1994 measure, but it correlates .84 with the 2008 measure.

The Reporters without Borders measures of Press Freedom also are consistent year to year. The average correlation is .94. The Reporters without Borders measures are available only across seven years, but they, too, show evidence of decreasing correlations across time. The 2002 measure of press freedom correlates .94 with the 2003 measure but only .83 with the 2008 measure.

The IREX measures of Media Sustainability are harder to assess in this way, since IREX has added new countries over time. From 2001 to 2007, based on the consistent group of 18 countries, the average correlation year-to-year was .94. The 2001 to 2007 correlation for the same group of countries was .76.

Freedom House and Reporters without Borders independently measured Press Freedom from 2002 to 2008. In general, the two organizations reach much the same conclusion over the years about the media systems they evaluate. Across the seven years, the average correlation is .83.

It is possible to examine the correlations between the Freedom House and MSI index across seven years. The actual countries measured changed significantly across time, making comparisons a little difficult to evaluate. The correlations do vary, but overall they are high. The average across the seven years is .87. Across the five years in which the countries evaluated were roughly the same (2001 to 2003 and 2007), that correlation was .90.

Reporters without Borders measured Press Freedom six years during which IREX also measured Media Sustainability. IREX, of course, has a smaller number of countries covered by its work, and, as noted, that number varied. The measures are correlated across time, but, overall, the correlation is lower between the Reporters without Borders measures of Press Freedom and the IREX MSI measures than between the Freedom House measures of Press Freedom and the IREX Sustainability measures. The average correlation for the Reporters without Borders and the IREX measures was .78, compared with the .87 for the Freedom House and IREX measures. The difference is not immense, but it is consistent across the years.

We also examined the relationship between a new measure, Freedom of the Net, released by Freedom House in 2009 (Karlekar & Cook, 2009) and the traditional Freedom House measure of press freedom (Becker & Vlad, 2010). While only 15 countries were included in the net survey, what these analyses show is that the Freedom of the Net measure is very highly correlated with the average Freedom of the Press measure. The Spearman's rho correlation coefficient is +.93. At the same time, the Net Freedom subindex for Violations of User Rights is more independent of the original Freedom House measure than is either the Obstacles to Access and Limitations on Content measure. The rho for the Violations of Users Rights with the average score of the original press freedom index is .82, compared with .95 for the Limits on Content

subindex with the original measure and .85 for the Obstacles to Access subindex and the original index. The differences are small, but the analysis does suggest that the Violations of User Rights subindex at least is picking up additional information missing from the original Freedom House measure.

We also have done some preliminary analyses of the results of the efforts of the Media Institute of Southern Africa in Windhoek, Namibia, and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung to develop an assessment system for the continent's media that would use African criteria and be undertaken by Africans (Becker & Vlad, 2010b). The criteria used were drawn from the African Commission for Human and People's Rights Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, which was adopted in 2002. This document, in turn, drew on the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press and the 2001 African Charter on Broadcasting. The product is called the African Media Barometer.

What we have found is that the relationship between the African Media Barometer measures for 2006 and 2007 and the comparable measures by Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and IREX are quite high. The two years of AMB data were combined to provide more cases for the analysis. The relationship between the African Media Barometer measure of press freedom and performance for 2006 and 2007 and the Freedom House measure for 2007 was .69 (Pearson) and .78 (Spearman). That same relationship for the Reporters without Borders measure for 2007 was .72 (Pearson) and .81 (Spearman). For the IREX measures for the correlation was weaker, with a .57 (Pearson) and a .31 (Spearman).

#### **Elite vs. Citizen Measures of Press Freedom**

The Freedom House, Reporters without Boarders, IREX (and African Media Barometer) measures are all based on evaluations of media systems by elite evaluators. We also now have examined the relationship between the measures of media systems prepared by these three organizations and the measures reflected in public opinion surveys of the BBC World Service Poll, the Gallup World Poll, and WorldPublicOpinion.Org (Becker & Vlad, 2009, 2010b). In 2007, The BBC World Service Poll included a question that asked respondents in 14 countries to use a 5-point scale to indicate how free they thought the media in their country was to report the news accurately, truthfully and without bias. In 2008, WorldPublicOpinion.Org, based at the University of Maryland, asked respondents to surveys conducted in 20 countries how much freedom the media in their country have.

The relationship between the measure of public perceptions of press freedom and the Freedom House measure of press freedom for the 14 countries included in the 2007 BBC World Service Poll is only .23 (Spearman rho). The correlation between the BBC World Service Poll measures and the Reporters without Borders was .25 (Spearman). The relationship between the WorldPublicOpinion.Org measure of press freedom from the point of view of the citizens and the Freedom House measure is .76, while relationship between the WPO measure and the Reporters without Borders measure is .71. The discrepancy between the findings from the two surveys is surprising. The surveys did use two different measures, with the BBC World Service Poll having a numeric scale and the WorldPublicOpinion.Org measure simple verbal descriptions. The BBC question was reverse scored, as respondents were asked to go from 5 to 1 rather than the reverse, which is more common.

Additional analyses of the relationship between public opinion measures and the elite evaluations of media systems were undertaken using Gallup data. The Gallup World Poll

includes a measure of confidence in the media in its core. Specifically, respondents are asked if they have confidence in the quality and integrity of the media. We have compared Gallup measure with the measure of Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders measures of press freedom and with the Media Sustainability Index of IREX (Becker & Vlad, 2009). The Gallup measure of confidence was unrelated to Press Freedom as measured by Freedom House and by Reporters without Borders. The correlations for the IREX measures were slightly positive. The IREX measure of Media Sustainability contains as one of its five components a measure of Journalistic Performance. The correlations increase slightly when this measure is used alone, suggesting that there is at least some slight link between Press Performance as measured by IREX and confidence in the press as measured by Gallup. The media systems with more professionally solid performance garner more confidence from their citizens.

We were able to return to the analysis of confidence in the media as measured by the Gallup core item and press freedom as measured by Freedom House later with a much richer data set, namely data gathered as part of the World Poll in years 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009 (Becker, Vlad and English, 2010). In the last three of these years, we had more than 100 countries surveyed. We first standardized the confidence measure based on other confidence measures in the data file. Usually, seven institutions were evaluated. Then we partitioned the sample into rough quadrants based on a measure of whether the respondent believed that others felt free to express political viewpoints. This partitioning of the data showed that the relationship between the confidence measures and the elite evaluations was masked. In those countries in which repression of freedom of expression is low, free media are associated with low levels of confidence in the media relative to confidence in other institutions in society. When repression of freedom of expression is high, however, press freedom is associated with high levels of confidence in the media. In free societies, it seems, the media suffer from their critical stance relative to other institutions in society. In restricted societies, the media benefit from a more independent and critical stance. That finding replicated across the three years for which data were available for this analysis, namely 2007, 2008 and 2009.

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