Written evidence from Dr Martin Scott and Dr Mary Myers (GMF0033)

The case for supporting UK-led research into Global Media Freedom

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1.0 Summary

1.1 We are writing in response to the call for written submissions to the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry by The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Global Media freedom to highlight the case for supporting UK-led research into global media freedom.

1.2 Rigorous empirical research and evidence has a vital role to play in helping us to understand both the nature of the threats to media freedom but also the most effective ways of supporting free and independent media as a pillar of transparency and good governance.

1.3 Unfortunately, there are a number of significant (empirical, credibility and interdisciplinary) gaps within the existing research, which makes it extremely difficult to develop effective evidence-based policy making in this area.

1.4 However, in recent years, a rapid growth of interest in this area amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students has allowed for the creation of a number of specialist academic posts in the UK related to media assistance as well as relevant academic research hubs.

1.5 As a result, there is now an opportunity to bring together this growing number of academics and researchers in the UK in order to begin to fill the evidence gaps described above.

1.6 Given this, we argue that there is a strong case for the FCO to improve the quantity of rigorous, independent, interdisciplinary research and evidence in the field of media freedom by supporting UK-led research in this area. We propose that the FCO consider establishing a Research Programme Consortium (RPC) in the field of media assistance.

2.0 The threats to global media freedom, and how they are evolving

2.1 Media freedom is under severe threat around the world. In 2016, global press freedom declined to its lowest point in 13 years. The World Press Freedom Index described 2017 as a ‘tipping point’ in the state of media freedom in many countries, following a resurgence of authoritarian governments.

2.2 This decline in press freedom matters, not only because it affects people’s ability to exercise their right to freedom of speech, but also because an independent, high quality and economically sustainable media can help to promote good governance, transparency and
democracy. This is why media assistance - or support for journalism, access to information and media literacy – is such an important (though often under-funded) part of ODA.

2.3 This was recently recognised in the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals, with the inclusion of a target to increase ‘public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms in accordance with national legislation and international agreements’.

2.4 The Global Conference on Media Freedom in London in July 2019 and the international campaign that it launched is another important sign that the urgency of the situation has been recognised and that the international community is now willing to take action.

3.0 Gaps within existing research into global media freedom

3.1 In this context, rigorous empirical research and evidence has a vital role to play in helping us to understand both the nature of the threats to media freedom but also the most effective ways of supporting free and independent media as a pillar of transparency and good governance.

3.2 Unfortunately, there are a number of significant gaps within the existing research, which makes it extremely difficult to develop effective evidence-based policy making in the area of media assistance.

3.3 Firstly, it is widely accepted that there is a significant empirical gap in this field. There is simply not enough evidence to show ‘what works’ in the field of media assistance. This scarcity of research and data is compounded by the fact that media functions across numerous development issues – including elections, corruption, peace-building, political participation, humanitarian response, behaviour- change and good governance in general.

3.4 The media’s role in each of these issues is distinct and empirical research needs to reflect this. Whilst there has been an increase in grey literature in this area, much of the often-cited academic research is based either on single cases, which do not attend to the cumulative effect of projects, or on aggregated media freedom indicators, which give partial and simplistic information.

3.5 Secondly, there is a clear credibility gap concerning much of the research produced in this field, in recent years. Evidence is often either generated in the context of project evaluations, which, according to Noske-Turner regularly produce a ‘quick and dirty’ collection of ‘success stories’. Alternatively, research is commissioned and implemented by development agencies, researchers, professional evaluators and implementing organisations who have a vested interest in demonstrating that media assistance interventions work.

3.6 For example, Schoemaker and Stremlau conclude from their review of the literature on media’s role in conflict that, ‘the majority of evidence is located in the ‘grey literature’ or policy documents’. As a result, there may be a reluctance to openly question current practices.

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and to reflect on failures. Research in this area must start from the premise that the role of the media will differ in different contexts and that media assistance may not always be as important, or effective, as is often assumed.

3.7 Thirdly, existing research in the field of media assistance suffers from an interdisciplinary gap. The media do not act on development in isolation. Their role in bringing about positive social change is bound up with numerous other institutions and causal processes. Given this, it is vital that research into media assistance bridges multiple disciplines, including economics, politics, sociology, anthropology and psychology in order to generate strong and applicable evidence across all development areas.

3.8 However, such interdisciplinary research collaborations are extremely rare in this field. This is due to both a historic under-valuing of the importance of media by other disciplines and a lack of researchers specialising in media assistance. As a result, the research into media assistance that does exist at times adopts a simplistic, one-dimensional understanding of the media: assuming, for example, that it has a direct, mass and uniform effect on audiences⁴.

4.0 The reputation and capabilities of the UK in promoting global media freedom, and combatting disinformation

4.1 Despite all these challenges, there is also some cause for optimism. In recent years, a rapid growth in interest amongst undergraduate and postgraduate students has fuelled a significant expansion in the number of university modules and degree programmes in subjects related to media and development. In the UK, postgraduate courses are now established at Cardiff, City, the University of East Anglia (UEA), LSE, Reading, SOAS, Sussex, University of East London (UEL) and Westminster.

4.2 This has allowed for the creation of a number of specialist academic posts related to media and development as well as relevant academic research hubs. These include the Media and Development Research Group at the University of Leicester, the Africa, Arab, China and India Media Centres at the University of Westminster and the Aid and Journalism Network Project at Leeds University.

4.3 Consequently, there is now an opportunity to bring together this growing number of academics in the UK in order to begin to fill the evidence gaps described above.

5.0 The role of the FCO in supporting those individuals and groups – both in the UK and abroad – that serve these goals

5.1 The FCO should aim to take advantage of this opportunity to improve the quantity of rigorous, independent, interdisciplinary research and evidence in the field of media assistance (and thereby contribute to addressing the empirical, credibility and interdisciplinary gaps in this field). To achieve this, we argue that they should consider establishing a Research Programme Consortium (RPC) in the field of media assistance.

5.2 This consortium would consist of a panel of researchers, from academic institutions both in the Global North and the Global South, who would be responsible for commissioning new research, maintaining academic excellence, and overseeing a number of capacity building activities, and a practitioner consultative group, responsible for ensuring the appropriate dissemination and policy impact of newly commissioned research.

5.3 As a start, the University of East Anglia and City University are proposing to study the international process launched by the Global Media Freedom conference in London in July 2019 – but this is a small and specific part of what we believe should be a bigger, international research effort.

6.0 Authors

6.1 Dr Martin Scott. Senior Lecturer in Media and International Development, University of East Anglia (UEA). Author of *Media and Development* (Zed Books, 2014) and numerous academic articles and book chapters on humanitarian journalism, celebrities and development, representations of Africa, mediated cosmopolitanism and the role of popular culture in politics. Currently the principal investigator of an AHRC funded research project on humanitarian journalism, Dr Scott has produced a number of reports, guidelines and evaluations for organisations including UNESCO, the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the International Broadcasting Trust (IBT) and the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association (CBA).

6.2 Dr Mary Myers. Senior consultant in media and communications, with a background in NGO project management and over 20 years of experience of media, communication, gender, governance and peace-building in developing countries. Currently a free-lancer, from 2002 to 2003 Dr Myers was an adviser on communications and media within DFID’s Policy Division and designed and helped implement DFID’s ‘Media for Democracy and Transparency’ Programme in the D.R. Congo. Dr Myers specialises in media research, training and evaluation for clients such as DFID, FCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, Swiss Development Cooperation, Free Press Unlimited, CIMA, BBC Media Action, and others.

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