



Beyond Bylines: Engaging the News Media in Urban Governance

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by

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Policy Brief

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Our current activities fall within the following broad themes: building policy capacity; Aboriginal governance; technology and governance; board governance; and values, ethics and risk.

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Policy Brief No. 15: Principles for Good Governance in the 21st Century, by John Graham (August 2003)

Background

It is widely accepted that a free and investigative press is an important mechanism for ensuring the accountability of elected officials and bureaucracies to ordinary citizens. It is also well accepted that this mechanism is not working as well as it could be.¹

Many South Asians are increasingly concerned that journalists are not paying attention to issues which matter. Despite boasting a relatively free and investigative press, and despite an immensity of socio-political problems desperately in need of attention, Indian newspapers assign only 4% of their coverage to social reporting.² The low priority accorded to social reporting is partly due to a perception among media professionals (publishers, editors, journalists, etc.) of a lack of public interest in news coverage of urban poverty and development issues. An important consequence of this is that major social issues facing hundreds of millions of people – such as the lack of adequate basic services for the urban poor – receive almost no coverage in the mainstream South Asian media.

A number of other aspects of the relationships between local officials, the news media and citizens (particularly poor citizens) are not working well. A phenomenon closely related to the limited interest in social issues among journalists is the weakness of consumer culture among the urban poor. The urban poor tend not to see themselves as having the right or the capacity to exact a minimum standard of public service delivery from local officials. Furthermore, there is a tendency for the media to aggressively challenge and criticize the government as a matter of course. While independent,

¹ For example, see journalism scholars such as New York University's Jay Rosen, who have sited "declining [public] trust in the news media, a shrinking and fragmenting audience, a rising tide of cynicism and disaffection in public life, a dwindling sense of mission within newsrooms and a general sense that the craft has been misfiring in its attempts to engage people in the news of the day." See Rosen, Jay, "What is Public Journalism?" available on the World Wide Web at http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/journal/Faculty/bios/rosen/public_journalism.htm.

² Understanding Print Media for Advocacy: A Users Handbook on What Makes News?, Bangalore: Communication for Development and Learning, 2000.

investigative journalism is an essential component of well-functioning democracies, an aggressively antagonistic relationship with the press can lead to a culture of withdrawal and secrecy among government officials. South Asian government officials are often reluctant to meet with journalists and can be defensive in their communications with the media. The result of this is a loss of confidence in government, inadequate understanding of complex social issues by citizens and journalists, and no improvement in the government's delivery of services.

THE MAGNET PROGRAMME

The Institute On Governance is completing a two-and-a-half-year action-research programme in an attempt to effect a modest improvement in the local media's contribution to urban governance and poverty alleviation. The South Asia Media and Governance Network Programme (MAGNET) sought to address two aspects in particular of the relationship between the news media, the urban poor and local government: the weak 'consumer culture' among the urban poor; and poor relations between local media and local government.

We attempted this by creating a media – government – civil-society 'Forum' in each of three South Asian cities: Dehiwala–Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka; Kathmandu, Nepal; and Sangli, India. In each Forum, local government, civil-society organizations representing the urban poor, and representatives of the local news media attempted to act as equal partners to identify and discuss pressing service delivery issues facing urban poor communities. Additionally, each Forum was responsible for the design and implementation of a service delivery improvement project within its city.

Our rationale was that including the news media as an equal partner in the decision-making process would have a number of effects, both on the news media and on the dynamics of service delivery to the urban poor in target cities:

First, we hoped that the inclusion of the media would help civil-society organizations representing the urban poor to disrupt the 'vicious circle' of local government inattention to service delivery issues.

The close presence of journalists, we reasoned, would encourage accountability in local government, transparency in decision-making, and ensure that the ‘voice’ of the urban poor was heard in service delivery issues which affect them. This, in turn, was expected to encourage the urban poor to have greater expectations and make greater demands of their local government.

Second, through regular reporting on the issues and problems surrounding basic public service delivery, we believed that the news media could raise awareness about causes of failures in service delivery and about the relative roles and responsibilities of different elements of society in solving the problems.

Third, by giving the media a stakeholder role in the Forum, we hoped a less confrontational dynamic would emerge between local government and the media, one which would bear dividends for both parties and, most importantly, for the urban poor.

IMPACT

The MAGNET Forums were each able to deliver service delivery improvements to their target communities. Two slums in Sangli, India, received badly needed community-toilet facilities, water and electrical connections. In Dehiwala–Mt. Lavinia, Sri Lanka, one slum received community-toilet and bathing facilities while another received a substantial upgrade in its drainage infrastructure. In Kathmandu, Nepal, community groups concerned about environmental degradation along the banks of the Bagmati and Bishnumati rivers were able to effect a modest clean-up of the area by mobilizing local youth and initiating much-needed sanitation and waste-management services.

In addition to the successful delivery of these services, the MAGNET Forums provided insights into the opportunities for and obstacles to constructively engaging the news media in urban governance.

Opportunities...

The interest among local media in playing a more effective role in local governance...

Editors and publishers in all three cities identified strongly with the need to establish a more constructive dynamic with local media and to ‘raise the bar’ of urban governance reporting in general. When approached, most were pleased to support their local Forum by assigning reporters. In general, most participating reporters tended to be print journalists, while broadcast media tended not to have sufficient staff to assign journalists to the Forum on a permanent basis.

Local news media can make a positive impact on local governance...

As expected, the experiences of the MAGNET Forums support the hypothesis that the participation of local news media can increase accountability and transparency in urban governance. For example:

- In Sangli, India, the news media’s regular reporting of Forum deliberations helped to publicize service delivery improvements in two local slums. This in turn led to demands by other citizens for similar improvements in their communities.
- In Dehiwala–Mt. Lavinia (DML), Sri Lanka, critical press coverage seems to have effectively ended covert and overt opposition by a group of elected members who were less than pleased with the newfound ability of the urban poor to bypass them and demand improved services directly from local government officials.
- News media participation in the DML Forum also helped to draw attention to larger service delivery failings within the city. For example, when press reports noted that one of the target communities (selected for a service delivery pilot project by the Forum) had not been receiving waste collection services, this prompted intense scrutiny of municipal waste-collection policies by elected officials.
- In all Forums, the media’s reporting of commitments by local government provided powerful incentives for officials to deliver on time and as promised.

The interest of local government in improving relations with local news media...

Some local government officials, approached during the inception stages of the MAGNET programme, were leery of engaging in close partnerships with local journalists. The Mayor of one Sri Lankan city candidly admitted that he thought the news media would take advantage of increased proximity and access to write damaging stories about his administration.

That said, other municipal officials jumped at the opportunity to include journalists in service delivery consultations. Municipal officials in Sangli, India, admitted to feeling some trepidation at the thought of exposing themselves to greater media scrutiny. However, they were attracted by the idea of building a less confrontational relationship with journalists, seeing it as an opportunity to more effectively voice the local government's views on service delivery issues.

Local government has much to gain from including citizens and journalists in service delivery consultations...

Building a more constructive dynamic between journalists and local officials was not always a smooth process. Local officials tended to react badly to press reports which painted them in a negative light, particularly if those reports came from journalists participating in the Forums.

That said, participating officials were generally pleased with the increased transparency and accountability which accompanied media participation in service delivery projects.

And Challenges...

The above highlights notwithstanding, the experience of the MAGNET Forums also suggests a number of obstacles to constructively engaging the media in urban governance.

The difficulty of engaging the media in decision-making...

Engaging the media in the Forum process was a serious problem for the MAGNET programme.

Forums reported lower-than-expected levels of media participation, reservations among journalists about their role in the Forums, and difficulty sustaining the interest of participating journalists. Key concerns raised by participating journalists included the following:

- Many reporters were uneasy with the *perceived* and *actual* impact of 'partnership' with local government and civil-society on their ability to remain objective. If they were stakeholders in the Forum, would their coverage of its activities constitute advocacy rather than journalism? How would journalists who were not participants in the Forum process perceive them? How should they manage the tension between, as journalists, needing to create saleable stories and, as stakeholders, knowing that inconveniently timed press reports might jeopardise progress? What if they chose not to run a story, only to be "scooped" by another participating journalist from a rival publication?
- In some Forums, deliberations focussed almost exclusively on the implementation of the service delivery upgrades in one or two target communities, rather than on broad issues of urban governance or poverty alleviation. Participating journalists tended to find these deliberations overly technical and too small in scale and scope to consistently generate saleable stories.
- Some news professionals perceive a lack of public interest in news coverage of urban poverty and development issues, which translates into editors and publishers assigning low priority to social reporting.

LESSONS LEARNED

What, then, are the lessons for local governments, NGOs, and development organizations hoping to engage the news media more constructively in issues of governance, development, and poverty alleviation?

Respect the neutrality of journalists...

In hindsight, participating journalists were far more effective and comfortable observing Forum

deliberations and holding actors accountable than in acting as ‘partners’ in the decision-making process. The greatest gains in accountability and transparency occurred when journalists acted most independently, even if this resulted in comparatively little coverage of Forum activities.

Build relationships with individual publishers, editors and reporters...

There is a perception among many South Asian media professionals that social issues are of little interest to the news-consuming public. Moreover, it may take reporters some time to develop a familiarity with complex urban governance and urban poverty issues.

However, the experience of the MAGNET Programme suggests that there are journalists out there who are interested in these issues and willing to make the commitment of time and energy to engage with them. The challenge for those interested in initiatives such as MAGNET is to find these journalists and support their efforts at self-education and engagement.

Create value for journalists...

While the MAGNET programme was correct in surmising that journalists could bring increased accountability and transparency to urban governance, it failed to adequately address what journalists themselves would gain by participating. To sustain the participation of journalists in initiatives of this type, it is important to create incentives for their participation. This means that the initiatives which journalists are asked to participate in should be large enough in scale and scope to provide them with a consistent source of saleable stories. It might also mean investing in individual journalists by providing professional development opportunities or exclusive access to senior officials.

Memo to civil-society: journalists are not on your ‘side’...

Some civil-society organisations perceive the news media as a civil-society organization and expect journalists to side with them against government as a matter of course. While journalists are sometimes

happy to oblige, often they are uncomfortable with the advocacy role assigned to them by NGOs.

In multistakeholder partnerships involving the news media, it is important for all parties to remember that the media should not be on anyone’s ‘side’ but, rather, may be a means of increasing the accountability and transparency of the multistakeholder process.

Memo to local government: nobody said this would be easy...

As discussed earlier, efforts to engage the news media in urban governance can be uncomfortable for local officials. The process of increasing transparency and accountability can touch on sensitive issues, upset entrenched interests, and uncover embarrassing errors and practices. On the other hand, it can also: dramatically increase efficiency; increase the satisfaction of citizens with their services; build trust between citizens, the media and local government; and reduce corruption.

The experience of the MAGNET programme suggests that this process can be less painful – if not pleasant – where local government leaders make sincere efforts at embracing increased transparency and greater participation by citizens in decision making. Strong commitment from the top levels of municipal administrations is a necessary prerequisite to altering prevailing organizational cultures and overcoming entrenched interests.

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of the MAGNET programme supports the hypotheses that: many news media professionals are willing to engage more constructively with urban governance issues; the news media can have a positive impact on government behaviour; and increased media engagement in urban governance can lead to improvements in service delivery.

However, our experience did not support our initial hypothesis that increased contact between the news media and government would result in a less adversarial relationship. Nor did increased news media participation automatically result in more news coverage, much less improved public

awareness of urban governance or urban poverty issues.

This suggests that engaging the news media in urban governance through mechanisms such as the MAGNET Forums will be *most* useful when the objective is to improve governance processes and, in turn, service delivery. It further suggests that it will be *least* useful when the objective is to: promote existing or planned activities; engage in advocacy or awareness raising; or improve the relationship between the news media and local government.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Case studies on the individual MAGNET Forums can be downloaded from the MAGNET website at: www.iog.ca/MAGNET/research.html.