Measuring Press Freedom and Media Sector Performance: How Social Media have Affected the Media Sustainability Index

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Abstract: The present text explains how the Media Sustainability Index has refined its instrument and procedures to better capture the impact of social media.

Keywords: Media Sustainability Index, social media, MSI methodology

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Mesurer la liberté de la presse et la performance du secteur média: comment les médias sociaux ont-ils affecté Media Sustainability Index?

Résumé : Cet article s'intéresse à donner des éléments de réponse à la problématique suivante : comment Media Sustainability Index a-t-il affiné ses outils et procédures afin de mieux saisir l'impact des médias sociaux ?

Mots-clés : Media Sustainability Index, médias sociaux, MSI méthodologie

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In 1999, when the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) originally designed the Media Sustainability Index (MSI), the organization, along with its implementation partners Freedom House and the International Journalism Foundation, were engaged in technical assistance projects to promote and strengthen independent media in 10 East European countries stretching from Hungary to Ukraine. Media in the region dealt with numerous challenges, including unfriendly legal environments, governments and political forces bent on controlling the flow of information, a dearth of journalists both trained and willing to engage in objective reporting, and media institutions not designed to attract diverse, independent sources of financing for their operations.

The Internet had been used by the news media in the region for a few years, and many outlets were online. Many newspapers made the text of their stories available on websites. Radio stations such as Serbia’s B92 got around restrictions on terrestrial reach and the occasional closure at government hands by making broadcasts available over the Internet. Social media at the time were nothing like they are today, but examples included letters to the editor, radio call-in shows, online message boards, and the like. Overall, Internet users were still limited mainly to elites, students, and other young users; areas outside cities often had little or no access. When the MSI was first used in 2001, little had changed: the Uzbekistan chapter for that year reported that most rural Uzbeks had not even heard of the Internet. (IREX 2001)

IREX’s technical assistance projects in each country pioneered a holistic approach to media development rather than focusing solely on journalism training or legal reform. While including these components, the projects also supported the creation and bolstering of existing associations to support the journalism profession and organize media ownership in order to promote better standards and lobby governments for more favorable media enabling environments. Importantly, technical assistance was provided to improve the management and financial performance of media outlets; most media outlets were run by senior journalists who
had little or no training in the management side of media operations and were operating in post-socialist environments where a free market economy was new to most stakeholders.

IREX was well aware of Freedom House’s annual Freedom of the Press study, and was not seeking to supplant that work. Indeed, as is good practice for any researcher or media consumer, consulting multiple sources of information contributes to a better understanding of the topic at hand. Having the MSI, Freedom House, and other studies available enriches the understanding of the situation facing a country’s media sector.

However, as the name of Freedom House’s study suggests, it is focused on “freedom,” which now includes legal, political, and economic freedom. In the context of the holistic approach being taken by IREX’s projects, the MSI was designed to mirror the various parts making up a media sector in which IREX was working. Therefore, IREX included “freedom” as one of five equally weighted objectives in its methodology. The others are: professional journalism, business management, and supporting institutions, which, together with the legal enabling environment, corresponded to the areas focused on in our projects. A fifth objective, plurality of news, was not a direct area of work but rather reflected both a desired cross-cutting outcome of successful project work and an important trait of any media sector. That was therefore included as a key component of a sustainable media sector.

By sustainable, IREX means a media sector able to serve the public as the fourth estate and show resilience to pressures that would undermine that mission. Therefore, this article looks at measurement of a media sector generally, including media freedom, as opposed to press freedom specifically.

Within each of the objectives, IREX identified between seven and nine indicators that better describe what factors make up the objective as stated and help focus the thoughts of evaluators. These were developed both from discussions among in-house and other experts as well as institutional experience. IREX included established norms of a well-functioning media system as well as those that, as an institution, IREX had observed hampering the media. For example, pressure points that IREX and its partners encountered were included, such as unfair media licensing, blocking media distribution, and distortions of the media market caused by state media.

An additional difference between IREX and Freedom House (and Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index launched in 2002) is the reliance on a panel of about 12 media and related professionals from each country to contribute scores and their personal insights to the accompanying chapter prepared for each country. Panelists are provided with a standard questionnaire that corresponds to the five objective and the indicators within each. They are instructed that “the questions
apply to the media as it exists in your country and the most important aspects should weigh most heavily when determining your score.”

1. What the MSI Means by “Media”?

Citizens obtain information through many sources that shape and inform their opinions and decisions. In addition to information generated by journalists and available through traditional mass media, these range widely. They can include conversations that are face-to-face or via SMS, Twitter, or Facebook. Political or social messages are conveyed in literature, pop music, plays, films, and soap operas. Politically- or socially-oriented groups and other institutions engage in direct communication efforts.

Because of the focus of IREX’s media development work—namely with news media—the MSI focuses its attention on media platforms dispensing journalistic communications. This focus is not to downplay the importance of other forms of communication; IREX would indeed welcome the addition of other efforts to measure these individually or in some logical grouping. However, the scope of our technical assistance work and IREX’s institutional expertise lies with journalistic communication. While “media” has a very broad meaning, in its use in the title of the study it refers to what is understood commonly to be more or less “mass media,” although not exclusively since journalistic communications may be found on niche platforms that might not qualify as “mass.”

All media types are used for various forms of communications. Just as television provides a conduit for journalism as well as entertainment, so too do social media. Radio has been used as an organizing tool—for purposes noble and nefarious—just as social media have. As a result, the MSI asks the panelists who provide the inputs for each study to consider social media particularly in the context of their use for journalistic communication, the same as with other platforms.

Importantly, IREX has never distinguished between various platforms for disseminating journalistic communications. The MSI methodology has never had a separate or individual measure for newspaper, radio, television, Internet, or other platforms. When IREX developed the MSI, the Internet was already being used for journalistic communications. In each country, various platforms differed in terms of importance. In some countries, television was the most influential medium. In others, it was print. Community radio is extremely important in some countries. The importance of the Internet and mobile communications, for both traditional mass media and social media, has multiplied in recent years.

The MSI therefore focuses on the quality of journalistic information and the ability of both journalistic institutions—media outlets—and individual journalists to produce and disseminate it regardless of the platform or the medium. Therefore the
MSI is well suited to include the use of social media in its assessment of a media sector.

2. Why Measure Media Sector Performance?

To answer the central question of how new media technologies, specifically new platforms for social media, have changed how press freedom and media performance is evaluated, it may be helpful to first place press freedom and the media in the context of academic thought on how democracies are constructed. Although many of the countries that the MSI studies are not “democracies,” and many others are “in transition,” one goal of development work is to support organic forces in the countries under study that are leading efforts to create environments more conducive for democracy.

Many countries may adopt the various structures indicative of, and necessary for, democracy. In addition to an independent media, institutions such as an independent judiciary or responsive legislative bodies are important. In all cases, qualitative judgments must be made to determine to what extent the structures that exist in fact contribute to democracy, or how their shortcomings may hold it back. This is the ultimate motivation behind the MSI and IREX’s media development work: to strengthen and improve the contribution of independent media to democracy.

It should be noted that the authors of this article view democracy as somewhat of a moving target: that as a system of government it is constantly evolving and there is disagreement between supporters of it as a form of government on where it should be headed. In other words, at this time there is unlikely an “end point” in sight for democracy that signifies a particular country cannot become “more democratic” or more effective in its democracy. Therefore, use of the word “transition” can be misleading. For example, is Bulgaria still a country “in transition” despite being a member of the European Union and having a system of government that is clearly democratic in comparison with what it had for the bulk of the 20th century? Are its institutions sufficiently strong to resist backsliding to a point where it is no longer a democracy? Is any country, for that matter?

Therefore, for the purposes of this article, we define a democracy as a system of governance that is representative, transparent, and accountable. Given this definition, we assert that a free press, though more specifically, freedom to distribute and access information, is a critical element of this equation for an open society.

Assessing access to information requires, in part, an evaluation of press freedom, which can utilize a number of tools, not least the tools which deliver the information. Social media has certainly been a game-changer in terms of its unique ability as a mass conduit for information and as an equalizer for those with access to the Internet. That said, however, new media tools and technologies still provide the end users with the same information that the MSI continues to measure. If the media
Indeed, despite Marshall McLuhan’s famous axiom—“the medium is the message”—the authors take slight issue with his assertion in this article. The medium is an important conduit of the message. In fact, the medium on which the MSI specifically focuses is typically independent media. However, this is not the only message. In IREX’s MSI, the medium is the tool by which the message is received. The message, and the environment in which it is delivered, are also key elements to be assessed. Though new and social media tools have changed the rapidity and dynamism with which people participate in media production, civic dialogue, and information access, they have not necessarily changed the participatory nature of media.

As such, media are the vessels for information, which is at the heart of press freedom as well as democracy. This building block of democracy is an elemental starting point for any analysis of press freedom. Whether that information is represented as a newspaper article, a television broadcast, or a text message is somewhat immaterial to the ultimate question of how free the media sector actually is. The distribution of that information—and whether it is limited or obfuscated in any way—is the fundamental question. Whether there are political and economic restraints—arguably both are the same—it is the ability of information to reach mass audiences that is at question, for when it does, that is when the information can hold currency in a society, whether democratic or not.

For information to have currency it must be accessible, regardless of how that access is achieved. The five indicators the MSI uses to measure a media system’s overall sustainability are rooted in the idea of media organizations (whether traditional or new media) as an accessible source of information. The technology may provide greater access, as with social media, but the end result is still the consumption of information. With greater access to—and thus, presumably, greater consumption of information—the data citizens read and view or the bytes they download gain greater currency in a democracy that depends on the free exchange of information and ideas. It is also the “raw material” of prospering economies. (Hughes 2004)

In addition, information consumption would theoretically inspire a more engaged audience. Habermas’ (1989) definition of the public sphere requires a public that values dialogue and civic action. Such an environment may be considered that which is most sustainable on the MSI measurement scale. Indeed, Habermas’ theory gives legitimacy to the public as an institution of democracy and thus a component of a democratic society that cannot be ignored. Today, information can transform places in spaces where information and ideas are exchanged. (Hughes 2004) The greater the space for information transactions, presumably the more democratic and free the environment.
As a component of democracy, then, media’s role in delivering the information, and particularly new media, is critical to a deepened democracy, as Anthony Giddens (2000) argues. More access to information is one condition for a more democratic state. In a globalized world with more access to information, presumably the democratic situation would improve. Giddens emphasizes however, that information is not the only key. An active civic culture—or public sphere—is also necessary, even in the global information society, which is more interactive today than ever before.

As an informal institution, Almond and Verba (1965) argue that the public sphere is, in fact, grounded in a participatory political culture. In a sustainable and vibrant media environment, the public sphere can play an important role in the dissemination and consumption of information. One may argue that the Internet and its affiliated technologies are an extension of the public sphere, albeit one which in some instances can be more participatory and interactive. As such, if the Internet is an extension of the public sphere, measuring the freedom of discourse in that sphere would still hold to the same standards.

It is not the information itself that is measured but rather access to it and how that information is ultimately used; i.e. to make political decisions, economic decisions, or simply to remain engaged in societal debates. Brown and Duguid (2002) argue that it is the citizens who make up the democratic institutions and who dictate the value of information. As the primary actors in a democracy, citizens should be equipped to judge the quality of information and thus consume that which is most relevant to them. As such, it is not so much the speed and quantity that matters as much as the quality, which in part is determined by the level of freedom experienced in producing it.

Put into the context of international development work, information takes precedence over press freedom amongst the U.S. government’s democracy goals. Access to information is cited as critical to the health of democracy. (Center for Democracy and Governance, 1999) Specifically, USAID spells out as a goal: “A media sector supportive of democracy would be one that has a degree of editorial independence, is financially viable, has diverse and plural voices, and serves the public interest.” That media sector may be composed of newspapers, broadcast outlets, or new media-centered organizations. The end result is still the production and dissemination of information that meets established standards of journalism—whether or not the creator is a “journalist” in the traditional sense.

With the importance to democratic governance of information and its free flow, institutions such as IREX developed studies to assess the performance of the media sector or its freedom to operate, ultimately to provide a gauge of how an important pillar of democracy is functioning in a country. Such measures can also identify what forces are opposed to, or trying to limit democracy, and in the context of the media, what tools they are employing to achieve this goal. Unfortunately, these
studies have found that, collectively, such forces are undeterred by new media and social media: they have modified their approaches to adapt to the use of these media tools, but at the core these efforts are strikingly similar to their old means of limiting the ability of media to support the expansion of democracy.

3. What has Changed?

The purpose of this article is not to explore in-depth the impact that social media have had to date, or will have in the future, on journalism, news media, or how people obtain news and information. Scholars, media observers, and others have already done this and will continue to do so in the future. However, it is useful to summarize some of the key changes, including those observed through MSI studies.

In “The People Formerly Known as the Audience,” Jay Rosen (2006) succinctly describes a new “balance of power” in what was once a one-way relationship of media to audience. New media, including social media, have contributed to “horizontal media” where all users have more control over their own production and distribution of content, including news. Rosen notes that this shift is just that: it is not a total takeover of media by the audience at the expense of traditional media outlets, but significant enough that it “changes the equation.”

One practical consequence of this is that journalists have access to more sources of information, and may better represent citizen points of view in their reporting. More sources of information can mean better quality journalism, particularly in terms of better representing different views on an issue or picking up stories that are ignored—either on purpose or otherwise—by large media outlets.

One example, of many, from the MSI was pointed out by panelists contributing to the 2012 Russia study:

“In many cases such news breaks first in blogs and social media, then eventually makes it to the mainstream media. For example, during summer 2011, several bloggers reported about physicians refusing to give official disability diagnoses to disabled children because they received instructions to reduce the number of officially recognized disabled people—a bid to improve the disability statistics. The issue was actively discussed by bloggers, and some stories were picked up by individual media outlets, including online TV Dozhd and the online newspaper Gazeta.ru.” (IREX 2012)

This example, and others from the 2012 Russia chapter, shows the positive impact that online social media are having in Russia. It is clear that scores for some objectives in Russia, particularly professional journalism and plurality of news, would be lower than they are were these sources of information to disappear or be co-opted.
Perhaps even more important, as has been seen recently in many Arab countries and elsewhere, this horizontal relationship has enhanced the ability of the audience to serve as a watchdog over the media. Local, national, or international media that disseminate, intentionally or accidentally, a picture of reality that is different from that experienced by an individual may be held to account through more efficient means to reach others with an alternate view than was possible with print or broadcast. When the picture is different than that experienced by a large crowd, for example demonstrators in Tahrir Square, the many voices refuting the incorrect account have a good chance of presenting their side of the story or even correcting that presented by a media outlet.

A convincing example of the power of user-driven social media comes from the 2010 Azerbaijan MSI chapter. Panelists discussed the media coverage of the April 30, 2009 shooting at the State Oil Academy:

“Some pro-government media tried to downgrade the significance of the event, whereas some pro-opposition media exaggerated the story, making it into a terrorist attack on the state. All seven national television stations were given instructions not to run emotional footage from the scene, and censorship was exercised throughout the days following the incident.

“In contrast with traditional media, Internet media proved to be fast and effective in their coverage. Within minutes after the incident, students and eyewitnesses uploaded footage taken with mobile cameras onto YouTube and various other sites. It was an eye-opening experience for many to see that nontraditional media, not taken seriously before, left behind traditional media, including television, for coverage of hot news.” (IREX 2010)

Examples such as these show how online social media can and have improved the overall state of affairs of news and information available to citizens and, for willing journalists, improved the effectiveness and quality of journalism.

What has not changed is that some governments or other forces wish to control, distort, or suppress news. Social media users and the various platforms used are not immune to outright controls or distortion just as older formats were not. Early on, many of these platforms were ignored by governments and others; often they became havens for unfettered news, information, and activism. In some otherwise repressive countries, such as Equatorial Guinea, this space still is: the Internet is unaffordable to most citizens and the government is not concerned with policing it. (IREX 2011)

When these platforms become influential and more widely available, governments that have been active in controlling information begin to monitor actively online activity. Oman is a good example of this phenomenon. The 2008 MSI chapter for Oman reported that “the existing Internet forums give local events
more importance and allow for more free expression on some web sites.” (IREX 2009) However, the next year the situation had changed thanks to a high-profile court case against a blogger. That chapter reported:

“Dashing hopes that the spreading use of the Internet in Oman could provide a more open alternative to traditional media, in 2009 the Omani government began clamping down. A major turning point was the trial of a web moderator, Ali al Zuwaidi, for criticizing the government in a popular Internet forum. The authorities questioned and detained al Zuwaidi for 11 days over an anonymous post that alluded to corruption in the state telecom firm Omantel, and for publishing a cabinet directive aimed at ending live radio phone-ins.” (IREX 2010)

Increasingly users of social media and other online tools are meeting the same fate as those who once engaged in developing content on older platforms. Such tactics are quite similar to measures taken by repressive governments against critical journalists the world over.

4. How IREX has Adapted the MSI Methodology?

As pointed out above, IREX’s methodology for the MSI focuses on the quality of journalistic communications and the ability of media to deliver freely such communications to the public over time. The methodology is very flexible, then, in terms of accommodating changes in the tools journalists use to disseminate information. In the more than ten years that the study has been conducted, IREX has limited its changes of methodology to clarifications in the questionnaire, although in 2011 more substantial changes were made. These changes are both relevant and irrelevant with respect to changing technologies and development of online social networks.

More routine changes—and there have been many—have focused on the explanatory text supporting indicators in order to clarify various concepts based on the answers received. For example, based upon panelist answers it was clear that not all panelists understood the difference between “trade associations” (those representing publishers, owners, or other institution-level media) and “professional associations” (those representing individual practitioners), particularly in countries where the questionnaire had been translated from English. IREX found a similar situation in some cases between the indicator assessing market research and the indicator assessing audience or circulation measurement. In these cases clarifying language following the indicators was modified.

IREX has also made changes to ensure that panelists are as inclusive as possible in their evaluation. Relevant to adapting to new technology, IREX added wording such as “bloggers” and “citizen reporters,” concepts barely discussed in 1999, to the indicator assessing attacks on journalists, among many others, to be clear that they should be included. For similar reasons, although not related to new technology or
increased use of online social media, IREX also specified “photojournalists” and “political cartoonists” in that indicator as well.

Throughout the questionnaire, IREX has added specific mentions of new media, such as blogs, SMS alerts, and online social media, to be sure panelists consider these in their answers and evaluations as technology has evolved. IREX also added other, older media types, such as community radio, when it expanded the study into Africa to be sure that it was included (note that since there is a standard questionnaire, this change was therefore included in country studies in all regions).

Similarly, IREX has encouraged local coordinators of each study to include representatives from online media, including bloggers, among the panelists that participate in each study. Their points of view help to ensure that the studies include their unique experiences. Furthermore, inclusion on the panel with other media professionals promotes the fact that such media are as much a part of the news and information landscape as print and broadcast media.

For the 2011 study IREX added two new indicators, reworded several existing indicators, and revised the wording of one objective. As with the more routine changes to the questionnaire text, the motivation to undertake the revisions was partly related to changes in media platforms and partly for other reasons.

Particularly relevant to increased use of online social media was the addition of one indicator in Objective 5, Supporting Institutions, and the revision of two others. Indicator 7 in that objective previously focused on the ability of media and media professionals to access distribution networks. Ideally there are no anti-competitive or political barriers to using networks, whether they are for distributing printed materials, broadcasting radio or television programming, or sharing content over the Internet or mobile networks. That indicator also, before being revised, asked panelists to consider the quality of such networks.

To better reflect the differences between control and quality, indicator 7 was revised and indicator 8 was added. Indicator 7 now asks panelists to consider if networks are “apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.” The new indicator 8 reads: “information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.” In this same objective, indicator 6 was reworded: it read originally as “sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and not restricted” and is now “sources of media equipment, newsprint, and printing facilities are apolitical, not monopolized, and not restricted.” In part this change was made to include not only hardware used by those who wish to use online tools, but software as well.

Also relevant to increased importance of social media and online media was a change made to the wording of Objective 4. Originally adopted as “Independent Media are Well-Managed Businesses, Allowing Editorial Independence,” the
wording was changed to “Media are Well-Managed Enterprises, Allowing Editorial Independence.” This change was made in part to reflect IREX’s position that, regardless of revenue model, media institutions must manage resources; managing them well, including having a diversity of funding sources, supports editorial independence. The rise of online and social media in particular provide space for viable, alternative models (particularly non-profit or crowd-sourced) that do not fall into the strict “business” definition.

A more detailed explanation of the changes can be found in the Methodology section of the MSI, available online (http://www.irex.org/resource/media-sustainability-index-msi-methodology).

On balance, the changes made to the methodology for the 2011 studies did not need to be extensive in order to better capture how media and journalists operate in the age of social media and online distribution. Concepts of media freedom and journalism quality remain largely the same as when the MSI was developed more than a decade ago. And, since social media may be used for ill, maintaining, promoting, and assessing the principles of good journalism is as important as ever to balance and verify raw information and counteract malicious content.

5. Conclusion

Social media have changed the way many people access news and information as well as the way they interpret it and determine its veracity; social media have also had an impact on how journalists gather news and disseminate it. Social media or undiscovered technology and/or approaches may well do so even more dramatically in the future. However, social media are unlikely to make the journalist and institutions that produce journalistic content obsolete just as they are unlikely to make academicians and academic institutions obsolete. Considered broadly, both classes of professionals are in the business of communication. New technologies and social media have had an impact on both professions and the way practitioners communicate with their audiences, yet the principles underlying the quality of content or the freedom to pursue such content are little changed. Tools to assess performance in these sectors that are based on those principles are thus likely to change little.

Given that social media and other online tools have made communication and access to vast amounts of information possible, one could argue that now more than ever trained experts—journalists, professors, or others—are needed to serve as guides for those seeking the best information and interpretation of that information in their pursuit of knowledge. The impetus to assess the quality of their work, and their freedom to do so, will continue regardless of the means they employ to disseminate their messages. And likewise, governments or other forces interested in controlling information will modify the same approaches they now use to control or suppress those messages.
For the foreseeable future, current performance assessment methods for news media and media freedom can and will rely on most, if not all, of the same tools presently employed. These may require some modification, but on the whole must incorporate the same concepts: that which is being measured has not changed, though the means of distribution have. New ways to assess the new forms of distribution may be required, and these will become part of the knowledge that scholars, international donors, local media advocates, and others will refer to when making determinations on how to proceed with studies, prioritizing assistance, or crafting advocacy efforts to support journalism and media freedom.

One example is the development by Freedom House of their separate *Freedom on the Net* report. The authors of this article feel that this is the right approach to adapting to changing technology: the Internet, now the main form of distribution for social media and an important source of journalistic content, is nonetheless distinct from the content found on it and used for a variety of purposes. Developing a separate study that gauges filtering by governments or others, citizen ability to access all kinds of content, and other concepts related to the use of this source of information is a different proposition from assessing the quality of journalistic (or other) content found on the Internet or the ability of journalists to gather information and report freely.

IREX does not claim that the MSI is the last word on the quality of any media sector, media freedom, or even the sustainability of a news media sector. Anyone wishing to assess that for themselves should refer to multiple sources of information, just as media consumers should refer to multiple sources when attempting to be informed about social, political, economic, or other news. Neither does IREX claim to represent with the MSI related concepts that are not included in our methodology yet are an important piece of a broader assessment of the state of communications in a given country, whether it be robustness of social media, media literacy, access to the Internet, the role of media in political or economic development, socio-political messages in pop culture, or citizen perceptions of how their media serve them and what they do with the information they receive from their media outlets.

IREX’s MSI methodology is limited to its published parameters by resources and practical limitations related to our primary source of information: media professionals and related individuals in each country. It would not be appropriate to have the same group of individuals judge, for example, citizen perceptions of the media or the overall state of access to social media. Such assessments will need to be conducted with other methodologies designed for that purpose and can work hand-in-hand with existing tools.

Whether developed by IREX or other institutions, new tools will be warranted and will be welcomed, and have been welcomed such as *Freedom on the Net*, by researchers, development professionals, local advocates, and others. Existing tools
such as the MSI will continue to assess important features of media sectors that fit into the overall picture of freedom and communications in a country.

References


