

# The impact of the mass media on the quality of democracy within a state remains a much overlooked area of study

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*Media organisations are generally assumed to play an important role in democracies, but how effective are they in performing this function within specific states? [Lisa Müller](#) outlines results from an analysis of 47 countries, based on a framework which rates two separate aspects of media performance: the extent to which they perform a 'watchdog' role by providing information, and the degree to which they act as a representative forum for the views of citizens. She finds that no country in the analysis scores very highly on both of these dimensions, but that the variations between states match differences in the quality of their democracy.*



Modern societies could not be imagined without mass communication. Television, newspapers, the radio and the internet are the main sources of information for citizens all around the globe. But what does this mean for the functioning of political systems and processes? Few would doubt that mass media in authoritarian regimes – which are typically controlled tightly by the state – serve to maintain the existing power structure. One only has to think of the pervasive state propaganda disseminated by North Korean media to keep the country's citizens in line. There is also broad agreement that mass media contribute to democratisation processes, as seen for example in Eastern Europe during and after the Soviet Union's collapse.

By contrast, there is a great deal of controversy when it comes to the issue of whether free mass media serve or harm democracy once it has been established. On the one hand, adherents of what is often referred to as the 'media malaise' theory claim that because mass media in established democracies mostly operate according to market principles, they disregard their democratic duties. This is alleged to have serious repercussions for democracy, causing apathy, cynicism and ignorance with regard to politics among citizens.

On the other hand, supporters of what might be termed the 'mobilisation' perspective (who appear to be in the minority) hold that the expectations imposed on both the media and citizens by media malaise theorists are too high. In what they perceive to be a more realistic assessment, mobilisation theorists conclude that media sources provide enough information for citizens to recognise when their interests are in danger, and that media consumption actually increases civic engagement.

## Assessing the mass media's role in democracies

My book, [Comparing Mass Media in Established Democracies](#), argues that neither of the positions within this debate are well substantiated by solid empirical evidence. Most notably, there is a lack of research on democratic media performance and its effects on democratic outcomes across a wide range of countries and by means of a comprehensive theoretical framework and systematic multivariate analysis.



'Newspaper reinvented', Credit: danie; (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

A large part of my research therefore deals with the question of how democratic media performance can be assessed in a comparative perspective. To this end, a theoretical model of media performance is developed and found to be empirically valid. It is defined by two normative functions that mass media should fulfil in a democracy. First, mass media should disseminate politically relevant information to as many citizens as possible and thereby act as a public watchdog (which I term its 'vertical function'). Second, mass media should provide a public forum that reflects the diversity of the society (what I term its 'horizontal function').

Based on this two-dimensional concept, I identify indicators to measure media performance on two different levels of analysis: the structural or media system level, and the content or media coverage level. While the structural analysis comprises media market statistics for 47 countries – including most of Europe – from 1990 to 2008, the content level focuses on data from a content analysis of 50 newspapers from ten countries during the year 2008.

### **How does media performance differ across countries?**

The comparison of democratic media performance reveals a considerable variation across the 10 to 47 countries examined, and different patterns can be identified. Although some countries may be ascribed a higher overall degree of media performance than others, none of them score particularly highly on both the vertical and the horizontal functions. It therefore seems that optimising both media functions at the same time is only feasible up to a certain point. Countries either perform badly or moderately on both functions, or outstandingly on just one of the functions.

In a nutshell, while the younger democracies within the sample generally lag behind (especially the Eastern European, Asian and Latin American cases, but also some Southern European countries), different patterns of media performance can be observed with respect to the more mature democracies. The vertical function – the degree to which media provide political information – seems to be best guaranteed in Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries as well as in Japan. This includes the United States, often considered a worst case in terms of media performance. In contrast, the horizontal function – the capacity for the media to act as a representative public forum – is found to be much stronger in central-western European countries, such as Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

These patterns are observed with regard to both the structural and the content level. Further evidence shows that a country's performance on the structural level has an impact on its performance on the content level, thereby suggesting that the two levels are not independent of each other. The systemic conditions that media outlets operate in also appear to influence their news coverage.

### **Does media quality actually affect the quality of democracy?**

Do these differences in media performance according to the vertical and horizontal functions actually have an effect on how well democracy works in the respective countries? As it happens, countries with a higher degree of media performance show higher levels of political participation and less corruption. They also tend to have a more lively civil society, and elected representatives seem to reflect the preferences of citizens more adequately. These findings illustrate that media performance is clearly related to at least some aspects of the functioning of a democratic regime. Therefore, given its relevance for democracy, it can be concluded that the discussion over whether media fall short of or fulfil the normative demands imposed on them is highly significant.

My findings also question the general and sweeping assumptions that both the 'media malaise' and the 'mobilisation theories' make about the state of media and democracy. Ultimately, both perspectives could benefit from considering comparative empirical evidence that distinguishes between different aspects of media performance and their influence on different elements of democracy.

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## About the author

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