

# Media Indexing to Measure Freedom And Development

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## Abstract

*The importance of Communication in development has been recognized. The role of information in empowering people has been proved with empirical evidence. Nevertheless, attempts to quantify and qualify media intervention in development has not yielded one universal index that can be used on par with economic, social and political indicators used in measuring human development. Measuring media is contentious. It is a challenge to develop a media index with appropriate dimensions and indicators. Media is a complex concept and using it as a benchmark to measure development of a country has challenged the social scientists. This paper examines the initiatives to develop media index for measuring media development.*

**Keywords:** Media index, freedom index, development, social development, mass media

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## INTRODUCTION

Today there has been recognition of the existence of socio-cultural dimension of developments in the field of information and communication technologies. Development is more comprehensive to include social, cultural and environment and peace besides economic dimensions. “*Development is first and foremost social... ..intimately linked to peace, human rights, democratic governance, environment .....culture and life styles of the people*” (world summit for social development, UNESCO) .

Development is measured on the basis of scientifically validated scientific, economic, social, political and cultural dimensions and indicators. Mass media which is a social institution and pervades all these dimensions is yet to get recognition as a dimension to measure development. Nevertheless, endeavours have been made by UN to measure Human Development by incorporating media as a dimension but with little consistency.

UNESCO was instrumental in initiating a debate on access to information as a prerequisite to development since its inception in 1945. UNESCO successfully gave a new dimension to the concept of development by widening the perception of poverty to correlate with education, knowledge and communication. Poverty is a combination of materialistic and non-materialistic needs. “It also reflects poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communication, inability to exercise human and political rights and the absence of dignity, confidence and self-respect” (UNDP, 1997, 9, iii).

### **THE EARLY INITIATIVES**

The United Nations involvement in media dates back to the conference it hosted in 1948. The definition of information adopted by UN considers it as “prerequisite to the full enjoyment of freedom of information as a basic human right” . In 1948, the UN proclaimed in the UN conference on Freedom of Information, that Freedom of information “is the touchstone of all the freedoms ”and the UN General Assembly declared its commitment by stating that “ freedom of information is one of the basic freedoms and that it is essential to the furtherance and protection of all other freedoms” (No. 33 UNESCO Report, 1961). “ In 1958, the General Assembly of the United Nations called for a “program of concrete action” to build up press, radio broadcasting, film and television facilities in countries in process of economic and social development”. (Paris, UNESCO, 1961). Following this UNESCO conducted a survey by arranging few meetings with media experts, professional media organizations and government agencies covering three

important regions of Asia, Africa and Latin America, in places like Asian meeting at Bangkok in 1960, Latin American region in Chile in 1961 and African meeting at Paris in 1962.

UNESCO has been propounding the concept of independent media and free flow of information to prevent what is called the “risks of uniformization and exclusion. It has reiterated the development of pluralistic and independent media and has declared that “freedom of expression must be exercised “without any obstacle”. UN General Conference defended freedom of expression stating that press freedom is an essential component of any democratic society.” (World Communication And Information Report, UNESCO, 1999).

It evolved and recognized the new quantitative media index to measure the penetration of mass media in any country. Though it was not a comprehensive media index it assumed importance as it focussed on an initiative to recognize the role of media in measuring development. The media index by the UNESCO suggested minimum standards for the spread of mass communication in any country. The index required according to UNESCO, a nation to meet the global standards of development should have 10 copies of daily newspapers; 5 radio receivers; 2 cinema seats and 2 television receivers for every 100 inhabitants. This index helped UNESCO to quantify the mass media penetration in different parts of the world and categorized nations as developed, developing and underdeveloped. “Unesco suggested a yardstick by which to measure the sufficiency or insufficiency of mass communication facilities in the developing countries and evolved “Unesco minima”. When this yardstick was applied several countries fell below the Unesco standard . The report said that “Nearly 70 percent of the world’s peoples lack the barest means of being informed of developments at home” in 1960s.

For the first time, an initiative was made in 1950s to link media with literacy, per capita income, urbanization and industrialization.

Table -1 Shows Development Data for 1957-59 Illustrating Link Between Media and Other Indicators of Development

Newsprint consumption per capita	Per capita income .83	Literacy <sup>(a)</sup> .82	Urbanization <sup>(b)</sup> .69	Industrialization <sup>(c)</sup> .68
Daily newspaper circulation per 100 persons	Per capita income .83	Literacy .79	Urbanization .75	Industrialization .51
Cinema seating per 100 persons	Urbanization .86	Industrialization .82	Per capita income .80	Literacy .68
Number of Radio receivers per 100 persons	Per capita income .86	Industrialization .78	Literacy .72	Urbanization .71
(a) Literacy: percentage of adult population able to read and write (b) Urbanization: percentage of population living in localities of 2,000 and more inhabitants (c) Industrialization: percentage of gainfully employed males in non-agricultural activities				

Source: United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, Paris (France). No. 33, 1961- Spearman's coefficient of rank correlation was used in this analysis

Unesco premised that “ any realistic approach to the problems of developing the information media must clearly include an examination of the relationship between underdevelopment of the media and underdevelopment generally”. (Ibid). A survey was undertaken by Unesco to test the hypothesis and succeeded in correlating the indicators of development with that of media development. This was the first ever attempt in the world to apply statistics to correlate media and development in order to make the study more scientific and systematic.

This data was collected from 120 underdeveloped countries of South East Asia, Latin America, Africa and Middle East. The survey considered media as one dimension was associated with economic, social and educational development dimensions. The Table 1 shows that there is correlation between media and economic development when development is measured in terms of income. With this study Unesco showed with empirical evidence that media data could be correlated with economic data to measure the

development of a country. This data for underdeveloped countries was compared with that of developed countries and “it confirmed that as income rises, the demand for mass media increases in comparatively greater proportion in the underdeveloped than in the developed countries” (No33, UNESCO Report, 1961). The study inferred that improved economy helps in the expansion of mass media.

Though the methodology adopted by UN was debatable and later was rejected by communication scholars in the 1990s it however introduced media as one of the dimensions to measure national development on par with economic dimensions. UN encouraged scholars to study mass communication by establishing an independent office and appointing various committees and instituting research studies on mass communication from 1960s onwards. The UN General Conference invited scholars to study mass communication from the perspective of development and established formal department within UN to implement the media development programme in developing countries.

## **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX AND MEDIA**

A review of Human Development Reports published in the last 25 years helps in understanding the changing perception of media and its pivotal role in measuring development.

Launched on 24 May 1990 in London, the first Human Development Report, opened with a simply stated premise: “People are the real wealth of a nation and human development is all about enlarging their choices.”

The very first HDI in 1990 raised the vital issue of Freedom and Human development. In the absence of recognized measurable Freedom index the report called for evolving an index to measure qualitative indicators like freedom. “While the need for qualitative judgement is clear, there is no simple quantitative measure available yet to capture the many aspects of human freedom – free elections, multiparty political systems, uncensored press, adherence to the rule of law, guarantees of free speech and so on.” (HDI

Report 1990). What is needed is considerable empirical work to quantify various indicators of human freedom and to explore further the link between human freedom and human development.” (HDI Report 1990).

In the HDI Report of 1991, the world becomes conscious of freedom. “A human freedom index (HFI) is presented for 88 countries. Although much further research is necessary, a first, tentative conclusion can be drawn: high level of human development tend to be achieved within the framework of high levels of human freedom”. .....its very objective of increasing people's choices could not be achieved without people actually being free to choose-what they want to be and how they want to live” (HDI 1991).

One of the highlights of this report was the examination of empirical evidence linking of human development with freedom. "Any index of human development should therefore give adequate weight to a society's human freedom in pursuit of material and social goals." (Report 1991). In 1991, HDI ponders a great deal on integrating Human Freedom Index with HDI for the first time and discusses the merits and demerits of measuring the development of countries against this categorization.

It is basically a Freedom Index known as Humana Index designed by Charles Humana. He developed the Index after studying the reports, declarations and proceedings and debates on human rights. Humana Index consists of “40 distinct criteria for judging freedom”. Humana has based this index more on the issues that have been talked about under human rights. The index therefore reflects the issues deliberated under political freedom and human rights. Its 40 indicators also include issues directly related to press freedom. The index has following indicators about media (Report 1991);

- Teach ideas and receive information
- Political censorship of press
- Independent newspapers
- Independent book publishing
- Independent radio and television networks

Called the Freedom Index rather than press index, it was used in a survey undertaken in 1985 to measure the correlation between development and freedom in different countries wherever the data was available. The Index evaluates the freedom performance by categorizing the countries into 3 groups, namely High Freedom Ranking, Medium Freedom Ranking and Low Freedom Ranking. This Index was correlated with HDI index. Based on the 1985 data in the World Human Rights Guide an attempt was made to quantify the data to rank the countries on Freedom Index. The data was quantified by assigning a "one" to each country where freedom is protected and a "zero" to a country where freedom is violated, ultimately preparing the country ranking. On the whole the survey of 1985 gave evidence to the fact that there is association with human development and human freedom. It showed correlation between high HDI and high HFI but due to lack of data of the specific period of specific countries, the index could not be accepted. The Humana Index on freedom was criticized for being highly subjective and clarity on the perception of "freedom". However, Human Development Report 1991 did not use the Index owing to contentious issues. Nevertheless, the HDI report of 1991 assumes importance as it endeavours to recognize "Human Freedom" as one of the dimensions of Human development. Nevertheless, the report calls for more scientific deliberation on quantifying freedom including press freedom that is universally applicable and feasible to be developed as a dimension of human development.

### **DEVELOPING MEDIA INDEX**

Globally, there have been many endeavours to measure Media freedom as a broad dimension for determining the media and political environment of different countries. These organizations have attempted to evolve Freedom of the Press Index and rank the countries through quantification of the data. However, organizations like United Nations have evolved media index on the basis of media intervention in development called Media Development Index. Therefore, there is a dichotomy in the purpose of measuring media

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by these organizations as one determines the political agenda and the other focuses on social agenda of a country. Nevertheless, both initiatives focus on varied and complex dimensions and indicators of media. Measuring the immeasurable intangible issues of media and evolving criteria of international standards acceptable to all countries is the challenge one faces in studying media intervention .

## **MEDIA FREEDOM INDEX**

### **Freedom of Press Index by Freedom House**

The earliest attempt to measure press freedom and to develop a press index globally was made by the American organization called the Freedom House. It was established as early as 1941 “as a media watchdog dedicated to the promotion and democratic principles around the world”. (Laura Schneider, 2014). The need to have a press watchdog to promote and protect democracy and freedom of expression in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century is attributed to two things. Firstly, World War II focussed the world attention on media as a tool of propaganda when radio and cinema were extensively used during war by Hitler led regime illustrating the power of media. Secondly, the governments in different parts of the world perceived media as the potential tools of political power. This period also saw many intellectuals and political scientists establishing theories of media advocating media control to underline the significance of media as a tool of propaganda and public opinion. Immensely believing in media power in politics, politicians targeted media freedom and advocated media control and curbing freedom of speech and expression.

Freedom House was mainly formed to protect democracy and it enjoyed the support of then US President Franklin D.Roosevelt. As a result, this organization is supported with financial assistance by the successive American governments. Freedom House is claimed to be the first organization to promote the cause of democracy outside USA. It is an impendent organization but seems to fully funded by the American government. “ They analyse the

challenges to freedom, advocate for greater political rights and civil liberties, and support frontline activists to defend human rights and promote democratic change” (freedomhouse.org).

Freedom House developed the Freedom of the Press Index in 1980. It had already launched Freedom in the World Map in 1970 and ranking the countries on the criteria of political structure and freedom. In the absence of any criteria to measure media, Freedom House developed a formal index exclusively devoted to press. Though formal reports are available from 2002, this organization has been conducting worldwide survey covering 197 countries and annually releasing its report on International Ranking of countries on Press Freedom Index. It claims that the “index is based on the principles constituted in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR),<sup>21</sup> approved by the UN in 1948” (United Nations, 1948) .

The Freedom of the Press Index prepares the international ranking on the basis of freedom of press and ranks the 199 countries and regions under three categories, namely, “Free”, “Partly Free” and “Not Free”. Using a calendar year as the period for assessing press freedom, it assigns numerical scores to generate ranking on the basis of 23 methodology questions. Each country is given the numerical score and the score may vary from 0 (Best) to 100 (Worst).

The Index consists of 3 broad categories namely Legal Environment, Political Environment and Economic Environment (Freedom House Index, 2015). Under each of these 7- 8 questions about the functioning of the press and freedom of speech and expression from legal, political and economic perspectives are posed and responses for every country or region assessed. So, the Freedom of Press Index measures media freedom on 3 dimensions namely Legal Environment (30 points), Political Environment(40 points)and Economic Environment (30 points). Each dimension will have 7-8 indicators in the form of questions and each question is numerically scored between 0 (Best) and 10(Worst) and the range varies from question to question. For instance one question may have numerical scoring between 0 (Best) and

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2(Worst) and the other may have between 0 (Best) and 6(Worst) so on and so forth. Here lower number of points is allotted for positive responses and higher points for negative ones.

Though it is a quantitative measurement, the judgement is qualitative which can become subjective. The criticism against this Index relates to high degree of subjectivity in the assessment. “The fact that each rating is based on the opinion of one person only supports the assumption of subjectivity. This means that although the index quantifies the indicators and provides numbers, the process is very qualitative. The fact that one single analyst rates several different countries can be seen as another shortcoming. How can one person be a real expert and have in-depth knowledge of various different media environments? Further, the fact that both the indicators and the weightings were determined by very few people suggests subjectivity” (Laura Schneider, 2014).

### **Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders**

Reporters Without Borders or Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) in French is an NGO based in France. It was founded in France in 1985 by four journalists: Robert Ménard, Rémy Loury, Jacques Molénat and Émilien Jubineau and receives funds from public and private institutions. It also gets financial support from French government but claims to mobilize financial resources outside governmental institutions. It started publishing Press Freedom Index since 2002 “reflecting the degree of freedom that journalists, news organizations and netizens enjoy in each country, and the efforts made by the authorities to respect and ensure respect for this freedom” (Reporters Without Borders, 2014). It has worldwide presence with a huge network of correspondents in 150 countries. Known for radical thoughts, RSF has been documenting the functioning of media across the globe on wide range of issues like press censorship, violence against journalists, killing of journalists and press environment. It carries out media service by documenting every incident involving journalists.

Claims to be a consultant of UNESCO, RSF publishes the Press Freedom Index annually covering 180 countries and is recognized globally. Basically the assessment is thematic focussed on the safety of journalist and the freedom enjoyed by journalists in reporting news in every country. “The Reporters Without Borders', World Press Freedom Index ranks the performance of 180 countries according to a range of criteria that include media pluralism and independence, respect for the safety and freedom of journalists, and the legislative, institutional and infrastructural environment in which the media operate” (Report 2015).

The Index is based on the annual survey conducted in 180 countries . Its scoring system is 0-100 where (0) is Perfect Media Freedom and (100) is Worst Media Freedom suggesting (0) signifies best and (100) signifies worst. The Index has following categories (Report 2015);

- 0 to 15 points: **Good situation**
- 15.01 to 25 points: **Satisfactory situation**
- 25.01 to 35 points: **Noticeable problems**
- 35.01 - 55 points: **Difficult situation**
- 55.01 - 100 points: **Very serious situation**

The Freedom Index has 7 dimensions namely, Pluralism, Media Independence, Environment and self-censorship, Legislative framework, Transparency, Infrastructure and Abuses. The questionnaire consists of both close ended and open ended questions and weightage in terms of points varies depending on its importance and is exhaustive. It conducts a survey and distributes the questionnaires to a sample of respondents in each country and is available in 20 languages. Over the years, the Press Freedom Index has been recognized and cited as a valuable document by governments and organizations worldwide.

With abundant quantitative data at its disposal, RSF has attempted to give insight into two issues. Firstly, it has given a correlation between freedom of a country and the press freedom prevalent in that country illustrating the degree of freedom given to journalists even in democracies. The comparative

study makes interesting revelations. Secondly, it attempts to compare and correlate the Press Freedom Index with important economic indicators viz., Oil exports, purchase of weapons and per capita GDP. This is perhaps the first time an independent organization has attempted a correlative study of economic stability and press freedom globally. Therefore, this initiative assumes importance.

The 2015 report reveals that “Per capita GDP correlates positively with media freedom (a correlation coefficient of 0.41). Norway and Denmark are good examples. They are among the 20 countries with the highest per capita GDP in the world and are ranked 2nd and 3rd respectively in the 2015 Press Freedom Index. At the other end of the scale, the world’s poorest countries such as Ethiopia, Gambia and Eritrea are ranked 142nd, 151st and 180th. In these countries, poverty and authoritarianism go hand in hand, and information is suppressed in favour of state propaganda” (Report 2015). The study points out that “Saudi Arabia is the best example. The world’s biggest oil exporter (7.5 million barrels per day), the kingdom is ranked 164th in the 2015 Press Freedom Index and got the worst score for legislation governing media and information” (Report 2015).

Table -2 A Comparative Study of Freedom Index

<b>Reporters Without Borders</b>		<b>Freedom House</b>	
<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Ten best – Press Freedom Countries</b>	<b>Ranking</b>	<b>Ten best – Press Freedom Countries</b>
1.	Finland	1.	Norway
2.	Norway	2.	Sweden
3.	Denmark	3.	Belgium
4.	Netherlands	4.	Finland
5.	Sweden	5.	Netherlands
6.	New Zealand	6.	Denmark
7.	Austria	7.	Luxembourg
8.	Canada	8.	Andorra
9.	Jamaica	9.	Switzerland
10.	Estonia	10.	Liechtenstein

Reporters Without Borders		Freedom House	
Ranking	Ten worst – Press Freedom Countries	Ranking	Ten worst – Press Freedom Countries
171	Lao People`s Democratic Republic	190	Equatorial Guinea
172	Somalia	191	Iran
173	Islamic Republic of Iran	192	Syria
174	Sudan	193	Cuba
175	Vietnam	194	Belarus
176	China	195	Crimea
177	Syrian Arab Republic	196	Eritrea
178	Turkmenistan	197	Turkmenistan
179	Democratic People`s Republic of Korea	198	Uzbekistan
180	Eritrea	199	North Korea

Ranking	Reporters Without Borders	Freedom House
India	136 (Category – Difficult Situation)	81 (Category – Partly Free)

The comparative study of Freedom Indexing by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders shows that there is 50 per cent correlation between the two indexing in both best and worst categories with first and last ranks showing no relationship between indexing. As far as India, the largest democracy in the world with a constitutional guarantee of Freedom of Speech and Expression, is concerned there is no relationship between the two rankings. RSF ranks India at 136 position under the category of “Difficult Situation), whereas in Freedom House global ranking, India occupies 81 rank and is classified under “Partly Free”. The difference is attributed to the choice of dimensions and indicators used in rankings. RSF focuses more on the safety of journalists and the working conditions of journalists whereas Freedom House underlines political, legal and economic environment in assessing the freedom of the press.

Nevertheless, the correlative studies also shows contradictory findings showing no correlation between press freedom and economic stability with China being the classic example illustrating the need to evolve a more scientific methodology to study the correlation between the dimensions of press freedom and economic development.

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