MEDIA AND SSG/R

ABOUT THIS SSR BACKGROUNDER

This SSR Backgrounder is about the roles and responsibilities of news media in good security sector governance (SSG) and oversight of the security sector. A culture of participation and transparency is key to a functioning democratic security sector. Media outlets and investigative journalism can contribute decisively to the development of this culture. By informing the public about the work of the security sector, journalists and news media also assume an informal role of oversight over the sector. On the other hand, media can also endanger good SSG through partial, unverified, or untruthful information and by irresponsible reporting that disinforms and manipulates public opinion. To play an enabling role, journalism and news media must be free from political or economic control and from any other interference that may lead to censorship.

THIS SSR BACKGROUNDER ANSWERS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

ABOUT THIS SERIES

The SSR Backgrounders provide concise introductions to topics and concepts in good security sector governance (SSG) and security sector reform (SSR). The series summarizes current debates, explains key terms and exposes central tensions based on a broad range of international experiences. The SSR Backgrounders do not promote specific models, policies or proposals for good governance or reform but do provide further resources that will allow readers to extend their knowledge on each topic.

The SSR Backgrounders are a resource for security governance and reform stakeholders seeking to understand and also to critically assess current approaches to good SSG and SSR.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN SOCIETY?

The media are the principal means of mass communication in societies. Media can be independent or not, official or unofficial, or just composed of individual journalists. The traditional forms of media include print and broadcast media, such as newspapers, magazines, cable, radio, and television, while 'new media' comprise online newspapers, blogs, email, websites, apps, banner ads, and social media. Social media has increasingly become the primary source of information for societies due to its accessibility, interactive nature, and real-time content.

The role of the media is generally to inform, educate, and entertain their audience. Different media have the potential to influence governments and public opinion, and this is determined largely by their relationships with the state and by their ownership. For instance, research has shown that the rise of authoritarianism is always associated with a tendency to gain influence over the media landscape, either through direct political control over state-funded media or indirectly by gaining influence over media ownership networks. Ideally, in consolidated democratic contexts, state-funded media should be free of direct political control, with robust oversight mechanisms. At the same time, there is still considerable room for influencing privately owned media, even in democracies.

Within the spheres of politics and government, the media play the role of 'watchdogs' for democracy, by keeping the government accountable to the public. Media contribute to both the representation and development of political opinion, and as such can have an agenda-setting role. Politicians also use the media to present their positions and decisions, take stock of public opinion, interact with the public, and keep them informed about proposed solutions to various governance issues.

Ideally, the media offer the public a space to articulate opinions through interviews, opinion pieces, and comments. Citizens also rely on the media for information to make informed decisions. However, the extent to which this occurs should be seen as a continuum depending on how free and professional media are in a specific country, as well as how educated citizens are in terms of using and relating to the media. Even within established democracies, there are differences regarding the freedom of media and journalists. This also applies to autocratic political systems where the media tend to be subject to various degrees of direct and/or indirect political control and freedom of speech is generally restricted, and thus not all views may find representation in the media.

FIGURE 1   FORMS OF MEDIA

PRINT MEDIA	BROADCAST MEDIA	INTERNET MEDIA	OUT-OF-HOME (OUTDOOR) MEDIA
• Newspapers • Magazines • Direct mail • Journals • Brochures • Pamphlets, etc.	• Television • Radio • Movies • Telephone, etc.	• Email • Social media • Wesbites • Blogging and vlogging • E-commerce • Webcast and podcasts, etc.	• Billboards and outdoor signs • Transit station ads • Banners • Wallscape advertising, etc.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

Investigative journalism is the unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power or accidentally behind a chaotic mass of facts and circumstances, and the analysis and exposure of all relevant facts to the public. It employs a methodology of reliance on primary sources, forming and testing a hypothesis, and rigorous fact-checking, with the aim of uncovering the truth.

Print media refers to any written or pictorial form of communication produced mechanically or electronically using printing, photocopying, or digital methods from which multiple copies can be made through automated processes.

Broadcast media describes an advertising technique that uses media such as radio and television that reach large audiences using airwaves as the transmission medium.

Internet media is a means of communicating using the internet.

Social media is the term for internet-based tools used for publishing, sharing, and discussing information, and includes blogs, wikis, and social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and LinkedIn.

Outdoor media (out-of-home media) is any kind of advertising that directly reaches consumers specifically when they are not at home.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND THE SECURITY SECTOR?

Even though both types of actor play important roles in serving the public, the relationship between the media and the security sector is one of healthy tension. This is due to the differences in their respective functions, organizational cultures, and underlying values. At the same time, their work is interrelated, and they often depend on each other to fulfil their various mandates. Ideally, democratic values and a culture of dialogue and transparency should infuse their relationship, but such a cooperative approach is yet to be realized, given the challenges stemming from democratic backsliding, the rise of authoritarian populism, and new and emerging security challenges, which both media and security sector actors must deal with in their different roles.

The media also play an important role as oversight actors within the governance framework of the security sector. While it is understood that oversight and control functions rest with state institutions, as non-state actors the media perform a critical role in scrutinizing the work of the security sector and keeping it accountable to the rule of law. The media can educate the public on security actors and security issues that are vital to the public interest, provided they take an evidence-based, thoroughly documented, inclusive, and impartial approach. This role of the media is crucial in helping citizens to make informed decisions and be aware of all the interest and stakeholders involved, of their impact on individuals and communities, as well as on possible solutions and choices available, and of their implications. Furthermore, the media fulfil a watchdog function by investigating and shedding light on human rights abuses and mismanagement of formal security sector institutions. This is often done through

MEDIA	SECURITY PROVIDERS
• Seek to disseminate information in a transparent and reliable manner, provided they are free and independent. • Are self-regulating, question authority, and demand openness, freedom, and accountability. • Seek freedom and full access to information, rejecting censorship.	• Aim to protect national security, one strategy being to withhold information. • Emphasize discipline, secrecy, security, patriotism, use of force, obedience to authority, and discretion, and tend to be conservative and homogenous. • Seek to control the narrative, often in the interest of national security.

investigative journalism, which is an important governance tool in exposing corruption and malpractice that undermine transparency, accountability, and management mechanisms.

Some critical features leading to tension in the relationship between media and the security sector are:

- blocked or restricted access to information that is considered sensitive;

- lack of trust between security institutions and the media;

- lack of sufficient knowledge of relevant media laws and security-related legislation, including the impact of media reporting on national security;

- reluctance of the security sector to share information, which may leave media with an overreliance on official statements with little room for criticism, scepticism, or investigation.

Some positive (cooperative) features in the relationship between the media and the security sector are:

- **Exchange of information:** Media rely on information from security sector actors that is not readily available to the public due to its secretive and sensitive nature, whereas security sector actors engage with the media for reasons of reputation management and maintaining public support.

- **Awareness raising:** Media offer definitions of situations, concepts, legal terms, and policies related to the security sector using simplified language accessible to a wide public.

- **Confidence building:** The media's role in informing and educating the public is instrumental in developing and sustaining legitimacy for decisions of security actors and building public support for security policies, such as defence policy.

- **Conflict prevention and peacebuilding:** Through peace journalism, the media serve as a conduit for the promotion of peace by facilitating dialogue and communication across various platforms.

- **Promoting a security culture:** Media contribute to building a security culture in society and in shaping citizens' perceptions and attitudes towards security sector actors. They can potentially assist security sector actors to educate the public about their roles, such as in security and crime prevention or the defence of national security.

A constructive relationship of mutual respect between media and security sector actors requires an understanding of their distinct roles and responsibilities, but also the acceptance of critical views as an essential component of informed public debates, which can ultimately support security provision.

HOW DO THE MEDIA IMPACT PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY AND GOOD SECURITY SECTOR GOVERNANCE (SSG)?

Media have a great influence and shape public perceptions and opinions on almost any topic. This gives the media great responsibility on how they frame the information they provide, which, if left unchecked, can endanger good SSG. The way in which content and information are managed and disseminated by the media is often shaped by consumer demand but can also be influenced by ownership, political ideologies, and cultural and social points of view.

In conflict situations, the media can be a force multiplier and become weaponized just as much as they can help peace. Irresponsible coverage can generate and perpetuate extremism, xenophobia, and violent conflict. Media can also create and facilitate arguments or cause deliberate distortion of narratives that may harm national security and the realization of good SSG.

Media may have a negative impact when they:

- abuse information or purposely misinform their audience;

- provide superficial coverage of security issues;

- mix information and entertainment, creating 'infotainment' with little depth that focuses on drama, simplicity, and immediacy;

- publish and disseminate official government statements without questioning or criticizing them;

- ignore dissident voices or misrepresent the diversity in society;

- focus on sensationalism instead of investigative journalism;

- adopt a biased approach towards certain societal or political groups, leading to reinforcement of elite consensus.

HOW CAN MEDIA CONTRIBUTE TO GOOD SSG?

Independent and accurate media reporting facilitates democratic governance by ensuring that the security sector functions within the democratic limits of its authority. When media adopt the following principles, it contributes to good SSG.

- **Transparency:** Media assess and inform the public as to whether the government and security sector are meeting their obligations for transparency. Through the media, the public learn about parliamentary and court hearings, executive decisions related to security, and operations of security forces. Security sector reporting on respect for freedom of expression and access to information, as well as the nature of restrictions on journalistic activities, buttresses legitimate demands for democratic transparency in the security sector.

- **Accountability:** Media play an instrumental role in holding security providers to account for their performance relative to their use of power and the resources with which they are entrusted. The media also scrutinize the efficiency of the larger system of democratic oversight and control of the security sector.

- **Participation:** Based on the media's assessment of security risks, and of misconduct and inefficiencies in the security sector, citizens can make informed decisions about electoral and civil society engagement and hold security actors accountable for their actions. Media also provide civil society with a platform for articulating and deliberating security-related views and experiences, thereby enabling them to exercise their oversight function.

- **Responsiveness:** Civil society uses the media to raise awareness about deficiencies and inequalities in security provision, thereby increasing public pressure on the security sector to swiftly respond to these challenges. Media also facilitate dialogue between law enforcement agencies and communities about the quality of security provision.

- **Effectiveness and efficiency:** Media can verify whether the civilian authorities are assigning the resources necessary for the security sector to perform effectively and whether these resources are being managed efficiently. As such, investigative reporting is an essential means of detecting corruption and can prompt investigations by law enforcement agencies into such cases.

- **Human rights:** Media ensure that citizens have access to information in keeping with the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and are instrumental in raising awareness on the role of the security sector in protecting human rights, which is fundamental to both public safety and national defence.

DCAF TOOLKIT FOR SECURITY SECTOR REPORTING – MEDIA, JOURNALISM AND SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

The **toolkit** was designed to address the needs of media professionals reporting on the security sector, especially in conflict-affected and transitional contexts. Moreover, the toolkit includes tip sheets for reporting on:

- Security issues (violent extremism, organized crime and the drugs trade, corruption and financial mismanagement, gender and diversity, stabilization and security sector reform (SSR), business, security and human rights).

- Security providers (armed forces, border guards, intelligence agencies, prison services, private security companies).

- Security management and oversight (executive authorities, parliament, judicial systems, independent oversight authorities, civil society, non-state security and justice actors).

- **Rule of law:** Media have a role to play in exposing abuse of power, corruption, and violations of the rule of law by the security sector. Exposing such failures to the public has often been a trigger for reforms or strengthening of laws and codes of conduct for security sector actors. Similarly, the media can demand greater protection of journalists, in order to safeguard confidentiality, press freedom, and editorial independence.

- **Gender equality:** Media can scrutinize laws related to the promotion of gender equality, as well as their application and adherence to them by the security sector. They can also contribute to structural and social changes towards gender equality within the security sector through awareness raising and educating public opinion.

HOW CAN SECURITY SECTOR REFORM (SSR) STRENGTHEN THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN GOOD GOVERNANCE OF THE SECURITY SECTOR?

Good SSG becomes more likely when media are free, capable, and structurally empowered to act as security oversight actors. If media are subject to government censorship, bias, prosecution, and restricted ability to criticize state officials, they cannot perform their functions effectively. In the absence of strong legal frameworks, the rights to media freedom and to freedom of expression and information are threatened. This can be manifested through provisions such

as criminal defamation, regulations concerning official secrets and their disclosure, provisions that authorize the declaration of a state of emergency, and provisions that make it an offence to endanger or threaten national security.

The media also run a risk in relying solely on official sources of information from the security sector and government. This can result in bias as it limits criticism and diversity of opinions, as well as the will to carry out investigative journalism. Bias is reinforced if the media depend on political and economic ties to the state and rely on state funding. In this regard, the credibility of media professionals and journalists is questioned and may lead to citizens seeking information from other sources that may be engaged in misinformation and the dissemination of 'fake news'. Additionally, the spread of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news and the exponential growth in artificial intelligence (AI) pose a challenge to the media in maintaining their effectiveness, efficiency, and credibility.

Considering this, security sector reform presents opportunities for strengthening the role of media outlets in ensuring the maintenance of their credibility as important oversight actors. To that end, the following recommendations are made.

FIGURE 3   SSR RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN GOOD SSG

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD SSG	RECOMMENDATIONS
Transparency	• The media must conduct themselves in an impartial and professional manner, exercising self-awareness, self-critique, and self-accountability. • Citizens must have access to information about who owns the media and who has the capacity to influence editorial production.
Accountability	• The media must be held accountable to principles of independence, scepticism, inclusivity, truth, accuracy, balance, and protection of sources. • Codes of ethics and guiding principles for the conduct of the media must be strengthened, while simultaneously enhancing the role of oversight bodies. • Media ombudsmen must be functional to oversee matters relating to the media raised by the public, in a transparent manner.
Participation	• Information must be a public good and, as such, media must be empowered to facilitate the exchange of information between the security sector and citizens. In this way, citizens are well informed and can participate in democracy. • There must be greater collaboration between the media and the security sector, building on their common values to boost trust and realize a constructive and respectful relationship.
Rule of law	• Laws and regulations must empower the media with the freedom to publish and the right to access information, immunity from giving testimony in certain circumstances, and the right to withhold sources. • The media must be free and independent and must be protected from the arbitrary exercise of government power, harassment, and censorship and from political, economic, commercial, and ideological pressures and influences.
Responsiveness	• The media must adhere to their responsibility to perform their roles and obligations in the public interest. Regulation must guarantee media pluralism to foster freedom of information and inclusiveness and to strengthen democracy. Media pluralism provides a choice to the public through a variety of platforms, which is key to deliberation and participation.
Effectiveness and efficiency	• The media must operate according to high standards of professionalism, ethics, accountability, legality, and credibility. • The economy must be able to provide an environment in which media can access more than one source of revenue to be financially viable and sustainable. This would allow for media to stay in business without profit seeking. If state and non-state subsidies are made available, this must be done in a fair and transparent manner to avoid unnecessary competition. • Media must be equipped with the necessary tools and skills to enable critical thinking, fact checking, and cultural awareness, which will enable them to effectively report on security sector-related activities. → For further information, see **DCAF Toolkit for Security Sector Reporting – Media, Journalism and Security Sector Reform.**
Human rights and gender equality	• Media must operate in an environment that respects human rights and gender equality.

WHAT TO READ NEXT

On media in security sector governance:

- Fairlie Chappuis
  Toolkit for Security Sector Reporting – Media, Journalism and Security Sector Reform
  Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2021.

- John McAndrew et al.
  The Role of the Media in Security Sector Governance: A Toolkit for Trainers
  Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2012.

- Marina Caparini (ed.)
  Media in Security Governance. The Role of the News Media in Security
  Geneva: DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2004.

On the conditions for free and independent media:

- Monroe E. Price and Peter Krug
  The Enabling Environment for Free and Independent Media
  in Media Matters: Perspectives on Advancing Governance and Development from the Global Forum for Media Development, edited by M. Harvey, 95–102.
  Paris: Internews Europe, 2006.

- Gerhard Schnyder et al.
  Theorizing and mapping media ownership networks in authoritarian-populist contexts: a comparative analysis of Austria, Hungary, Slovenia, and Turkey
  Media, Culture & Society, Vol. 46 (I), 2024: 38–59.

On the role of news media in intelligence oversight:

- Claudia Hillebrand
  The Role of News Media in Intelligence Oversight
  Intelligence and National Security, 27(5), 2012: 689-706. London: Routledge.

On case-studies on the role of public oversight of security:

- Chandra D. Bhatta
  Security Sector Reform and the Role of Oversight Agencies: Parliament, Civil Society and Media
  in *Changing Security Dynamics in Nepal,* edited by Rajan Bhattarai and Rosy Cave, 161–188.
  Nepal Institute for Policy Studies, 2009.

- Denise Garcia
  Not yet a democracy: Establishing civilian authority over the security sector in Brazil – lessons for other countries in transition.
  Third World Quarterly, 35(3), 2014: 487–504.

On contributions of civil society:

- Karen Barnes and Peter Albrecht
  Civil Society Oversight of the Security Sector and Gender
  Tool 9 in Gender and SSR Toolkit, edited by Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek.
  DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, 2008.

- Valérie Sagant and Laura Capobianco (eds)
  The Media, Crime Prevention and Urban Safety: A Brief Discussion on Media Influence and Areas for Further Exploration
  International Centre for the Prevention of Crime, 2008.

- John Klumpers and Laura Schneider
  The long term: sustainable media, viable media
  DWE Akademie, 28 August 2015.

MORE DCAF SSR RESOURCES

DCAF publishes a wide variety of tools, handbooks and guidance on all aspects of SSR and good SSG, available free-for-download at **www.dcaf.ch**

Many resources are also available in languages other than English.

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Geneva Centre
for Security Sector
Governance