

## **Civil Society, Empowered or Overpowered: The Role of The Mass Media in 'Promoting Democracy' Worldwide**

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Many studies have investigated the democratising role of the mass media in facilitating transitions from non-democratic to democratic modes of governance. Indeed, it is widely understood that the presence of an independent media system is essential to hold political institutions accountable to democratic principles. In the late 1970s, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) acknowledged that there were serious problems with the world's media organisations and took active steps to expand the democratic potential of global media systems, leading to their proposal for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). This plan suggested the need for a radical departure from (then current) media trends, and recognised that the current domination of media systems by Western states was inherently undemocratic. Thus the NWICO suggested that a much greater emphasis should be placed on national sovereignty, public accountability, and diversity, to help strengthen grassroots media and more participatory democratic principles. This proposal for a NWICO was strongly opposed by the world's dominant Western media corporations, because as Preston *et al.* (1989: 297) observed, their proposals if met 'even partially, would constitute a serious diminution in the influence of the existing transnational corporate information system.' The ensuing conflict of interest generated between UNESCO and the US government (and transnational media corporations), eventually led to the US and UK withdrawing from UNESCO. As a result, UNESCO suffered severe funding problems, which combined with the ongoing attacks on their legitimacy, in the US, British and French media, served to undermine the implementation of the NWICO (Preston *et al.*, 1989: 203-281). Since then, the free market has continued to play an increasingly important role in determining the spread of media systems worldwide.

The US government's opposition to the radical democratic agenda of the NWICO is consistent with its pragmatic approach to democracy; as the US has a long and well documented history of covertly overthrowing democratic governments, supporting dictators and funding terrorists to 'promote democracy' (Blum, 2004; Ganser, 2005). However, in the 1970s, in the wake of numerous official commissions investigating these covert activities (e.g. the Church Commission, see Churchill & Wall, 1990) the world's dominant superpower began to face some of the negative consequences of its unconstitutional activities. Unfortunately, these revelations did not seem to lead to a reduction of covert endeavours, but just to the realisation that a greater emphasis on overt political interventions would be a more (PR) effective way to maintain and expand their hegemonic power (Robinson, 1996a: 16). Wiarda suggests that the zeal with which the Reagan Administration promoted 'Project Democracy' in 1981 had a lot to do with their recognition that Congress, the public, and their foreign allies were 'much more cooperative and supportive' when the goals of US policy were 'presented as "democracy"' (1990: 147).

Subsequently in 1984, with bipartisan support, Reagan created the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), whose objective was to 'foster the infrastructure of democracy' to allow people 'to choose their own way, to develop their own culture, [and] to reconcile their own differences through peaceful means' (Reagan, 1982). This was seen as an expansion of previous political intervention strategies, which had used the American labour movement and philanthropic foundations to bolster US friendly counter-progressive movements and overthrow 'unfriendly' democratically elected governments (Lowe, 2004; Roelofs, 2003; Scipes, 2000).

Democracy promoting activities now rank alongside economic development and national security, as 'a pillar of American foreign policy' (NED Annual Report, 2000: 4). The rhetoric surrounding these activities suggests, that the promotion of democracy – through donor foundations, like the NED – is undertaken in a non-partisan, apolitical manner. However, Rieffer and Mercer (2005: 389) advise that it is wise to view such rhetoric with a high degree of scepticism, especially as the dominant theory in international relations – realism – envisages a world of anarchy, where nation states must primarily focus on national security issues. As many scholars have shown, democracy promoting initiatives are usually strongly tied to the donor countries' geo-strategic priorities (e.g. Robinson, 1996a, 1996b; Saltman, 2006). This paper will explore the previously unreported nexus between the promotion of democracy and the promotion of independent media systems, in an attempt to shed some light on the manner in which media 'reform' may be used to undermine state sovereignty and strengthen neo-liberal hegemony. Democracy promoting activities are carried out by most Western democracies (see Melia, 2005), but as the US is the dominant exporter of democracy, this paper will focus on the US's activities.

### **The National Endowment for Democracy: Democratic Exemplar?**

There is no doubt, that promoting democracy is an important activity and while the US Agency for International Development (AID) – the main governmental institution promoting democracy – spent around US\$500 million promoting democracy in 2000, their annual budget had quadrupled to around US\$2 billion by 2004 (Melia, 2005). At present, a veritable cottage industry supports the promotion of democracy, made up of various foundations, NGOs and think tanks. However, for the purpose of concision, this paper will only investigate the activities of the NED – the most prominent American organization 'promoting democracy' in non-democratic countries (Lowe, 2004).

Throughout the 1990s, Congress provided the NED with around US\$30 million a year, but recent changes have seen this amount rise considerably and in 2005 it reached an all time high of US\$80 million (Rieffer and Mercer, 2005: 397). However, compared to the US government's total expenditures on promoting democracy, the NED's resources have always been rather meagre. Despite this, the NED plays a central role in setting up and coordinating most of the US's democracy promotion programs. This coordination role is facilitated by its non-profit ('non-governmental') status, which enables it to overcome legal and political restrictions, which traditional government agencies providing overseas aid have to face. Indeed, some of the activities the NED supports 'would be illegal [to pursue] for foreign groups operating in the United States' as 'on a number of occasions... [the] NED has taken advantage of its alleged

private status to influence foreign elections, an activity that is beyond the scope of AID or USIA [US Information Agency] and would otherwise be possible only through a CIA covert operation' (Conry, 1993).

### **Promoting Polyarchy**

According to Golub (2000: 157-158), democracy promotion can take two main forms, (1) big 'D' democratic assistance, which concentrates on strengthening groups involved in institutional politics and (2) small 'd' assistance which attempts to strengthen civil society by empowering the citizenry and improving social-economic conditions for marginalised people. Unfortunately, US decision makers tend to prioritise big 'D' assistance, which leads to the promotion of polyarchy over democracy (Robinson, 1996a). Although these elite driven 'democracies' give the illusion of free choice, in reality, their overwhelming focus on 'procedural' democracy means that citizens are only able to choose between elites aligned with Western elite interests. Robinson explains the crux of this idea:

'The promotion of "low-intensity democracy" is aimed not only at mitigating the social and political tensions produced by elite-based and undemocratic status quos, but also at suppressing popular and mass aspirations for more thoroughgoing democratisation of social life in the twenty-first century international order. Polyarchy is a structural feature of the emergent global society.' (Robinson, 1996a: 6). The close alignment of the NED's activities with US foreign policy interests comes as no surprise, especially when one considers the revolving doorways between the US government and the NED's board of directors (see Scipes, 2005). Although, the NED's 'non-partisan' activities receive widespread support from across the political spectrum (that is, from Democrats to Republicans), there also appears to be a number of links between the memberships of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century (PNAC) and the NED. For example, John V. Weber (current chair of NED) was a founding member of PNAC and Fred C. Iklé (former NED director) signed PNAC's founding statement of principles. The NED was also involved in the Iran-Contra affair, providing funding to Oliver North's Project Democracy network (Blum, 2000: 182). All of this information is freely available, but within the mainstream media there have been no calls for reform of the NED, which illustrates the propaganda value of undertaking illegal activities overtly instead of covertly. Former CIA agent Philip Agee (2005) points out, that the NED 'programs always support the political forces that favor US interests and work against those opposed.' It is important to remember though, that 'the United States is not acting on behalf of a 'US' elite, but instead more likely plays a leadership role on behalf of an emergent transnational elite' (Robinson, 1996a: 20).

Ironically, Blum (2000: 180) referred to the 'promotion of democracy' as: 'a masterpiece. Of politics, of public relations and of cynicism.'

### **Strategic 'Democracy'**

Predictably, 'democracy promoting' activities tend to ignore countries which are (adequately) serving the interests of the free market and transnational elites, even if those countries are ignoring their own citizens' rights. This leads the US government and their 'democracy promoters' to overlook repressive elites in reliable oil sources, like Kuwait or Saudi Arabia. In fact, in most cases, the Western media – as predicted by Herman & Chomsky's (1988) Propaganda

Model – also works to discount democratic struggles in countries aligned with the transnational elites foreign policy interests: ‘Thus the demonstrations of the Haitian poor demanding that the democratically elected Aristide government be returned, or the struggle of democratic forces in the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi demanding that the popular will be respected are routinely ignored. The model is repeated in Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, the Gulf States, Colombia etc.’ (Kilibarda, 2004)

On the other hand, while many countries undemocratic regimes are downplayed, the NED has been heavily involved in attempting to ‘democratise’ Venezuela, which has been deemed ‘undemocratic’ by powerful transnational elites, as for example the US media (see Delacour, 2005). The reason for this may be partly explained by the antagonistic relationship between President Chávez and many transnational elites, as since his election in 1998, Venezuela has been promoting the ‘wrong’ kind of democracy, popular democracy instead of polyarchy. As Rieffer and Mercer (2005: 399) observe, Venezuela is also a major oil producer and ‘considerations of democracy are intertwined with the US need for reliable and cheap oil, especially from outside the volatile Middle East.’ In March 2006, the US government referred to Chávez as ‘a demagogue awash in oil money [who] is undermining democracy and seeking to destabilize the region’ (National Security Strategy, 2006: 15). Picking up this elite line, the president of NED, notes how ‘Chávez, having swept aside the traditional parties, then proceeded to attack the trade unions, the media, the church, the independent business community, NGOs and the rule of law in general’ (Gershman, 2004: 29). As might be expected, in the light of US and NED hostility towards Chávez’s government, the NED’s ‘democracy promotion’ activities have supported Venezuela’s pro-US opposition party, which in 2002 attempted to oust Chávez. Indeed, US Department of State documents report that ‘it is clear that NED, Department of Defense (DOD), and other US assistance programs provided training, institution building, and other support to individuals and organizations understood to be actively involved in the brief ouster of the Chávez government’ (2002: 3). Funding to such groups in Venezuela was also occurring before 2002. Just over US\$4 million was distributed between 1992 and 2001, with nearly US\$600,000 going to the Solidarity Center (between 1997 and 2001) – a group closely linked to the Confederation of Venezuelan Workers who were involved in the strike actions against Chávez in 2003 (Scipes, 2004). As Cohn (1999) points out: ‘Conservative and centrist, pro-US and pro-free market forces are strengthened and helped into power, while other indigenous forces are marginalized.’

Despite the narrow vision of democracy being promoted by US interests, democratisation efforts promoted by the NED (or other similar groups) still receive widespread support from groups opposing corporate globalisation (Chua, 2003: 13). Instead of evoking criticism, such activities are perceived (often simplistically) to empower civil society, and negative repercussions are pragmatically sidelined, such as the promotion of polyarchy and the aggressive pursuit of elite free market policy interests. A closer, more critical analysis of previous case studies illustrates how NED-led ‘democracy promotion’ efforts may in fact be overpowering many parts of civil society and institutionalising citizens marginalisation – not from despotic decision making, but – from democracy itself.

## **Promoting Democratic Media**

'In a world of advanced communication and exploding knowledge, it is no longer possible to rely solely on force to promote stability and defend the national security. Persuasion is increasingly important, and the United States must enhance its capacity to persuade by developing techniques for reaching people at different levels.' (NED President, Carl Gershman, cited in Robinson, 1996a: 2)

With the rise of what Aeron Davis (2002) referred to as *Public Relations Democracy*, it is apt that the president of the archetypal 'democracy promoting' agency understands the fundamental role of persuasion in promoting US foreign policy and 'democracy.' Promoting the development of independent media systems is understood to play an integral role in promoting democracy, but this raises an important question: is it even beneficial to promote the development of Western media systems in foreign countries, considering the inherent democratic deficit of Western media? (e.g. Berry & Theobald, 2006). Surely it is critical, that the media systems that 'democracy promoters' export and nurture overseas, will function to strengthen democratic processes and not weaken them (in the short or long-term). The answer and nature of this question is debateable and will not be addressed here. Instead, this paper will turn its attention to the US government and the NED, and examine their historical influence on the promotion of independent media systems worldwide.

The control of the media environment in foreign countries has been a goal of CIA operations ever since its inception. This included the promotion of 'independent' media in Western Europe during the 1950s and 1960s (with the overarching goal of combating communism) and one of the primary recipients of this largess was the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Other beneficiaries of CIA funds included 'the West German news agency DENA (later known as DPA), the international association of writers PEN, located in Paris, certain French newspapers, the International Federation of Journalists, and Forum World Features, a news service in London whose stories were bought by 140 newspapers around the world' (Blum, 2004: 104-105).

The importance of manipulating foreign publics was not lost on the Reagan administration, who institutionalised the US's domestic propaganda mechanizations with the creation of the Office of Public Diplomacy in 1983 (this office served as an integral component of Project Democracy). In addition, Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 130, which elevated international communications to 'an integral part of US national security policy and strategy' (Robinson, 1996a: 98). This directive called for the increasing 'communications assistance' to third world countries and further penetration of overseas media systems with US communications and military peacetime psychological operations (Robinson, 1996a: 99). In 1999, the Democrats gave the US government's propaganda efforts high priority and the Clinton Administration created the International Public Information Group to 'counteract [enemy] propaganda' and bolster support of 'foreign audiences' in support of U.S. foreign policy' to 'promote democracy abroad' (Barber, 1999). The US governments ongoing commitment to utilising the mass media to promote free market capitalism is characterised by the US State Departments Office of Public Diplomacy's attempts 'to win hearts and minds in the Arab world' with annual budgets exceeding US\$1 billion (Miller, 2004a: 80). Taking these ideas

of media control even further, both the US and the UK have embraced the Orwellian concept of developing total 'information dominance' in the public sphere: a policy characterised by the US Headquarters, Department of the Army report, *Information Operations: Doctrine, Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures* (reviewed by Miller, 2004b). As worrying as these developments are for global democracy, they are not directly linked to the NED's democracy promoting activities *per se*. However, they do illustrate the type of media that 'democracy promoters' aim to strengthen, that is, geo-strategically useful 'independent' media. For example, in 2003 the NED provided a grant to the Ethiopian company Zami Multi-Media, whose broadcasts aimed to discuss – among other topics – 'the need for economic liberalization.'

Consequently, 'most "democracy promotion" programs involve penetration of the target country's media' (Robinson, 1996a: 103), which is then utilised as a powerful foreign policy tool to overpower or challenge the legitimacy of governments (democratically elected or not) standing in opposition to transnational elites. Generic media activities that the NED promotes include 'scholarships for journalists to study US media practices, and subsidized tours of foreign journalists to special destinations, such as Grenada' (Alexandre, 1987: 38). Grenada media tours were popular during the 1980s due to the US's desire to manipulate the media during and after their invasion of Cuba in 1983 (see Blum, 2004: 269-277). Blum (2000: 182) also highlights the heavy media support that Cuban dissident groups receive. To outline the significance of such practises for democracy, this paper will briefly describe the NED's involvement in promoting 'independent media' in Chile and Nicaragua.

Chile has a long history of political interference relayed through 'independent' media. During the 1960s the newspaper *El Mercurio* received a helping hand from covert CIA funding to assist in the destabilization of the democratically elected Allende government, whose leadership was abruptly terminated when President Allende was assassinated in 1973 by a CIA-led coup (Landis, 1982; Kornbluh, 1998). With Allende's government deposed, the following Pinochet dictatorship heavily censored the media, an action ignored by the US. However, in the late 1980s when the US decided that it was time to replace Pinochet, the NED was used to provide aid to politically favoured groups – like the Christian Democrats – who in 1987, were able to break through the communicative barriers erected by Pinochet with their newly established newspaper, the *La Epoca*, 'which quickly became one of the country's main dailies' (Robinson, 1996a: 184). Later on in 1990, to support a US bid to oust the incumbent party, the NED provided *Demokratzia* (the newspaper of the opposition party – Union of Democratic Forces) with 'US\$233,000 worth of newsprint, to allow it to increase its size and circulation for the period leading up to the national elections' (Blum, 2004: 315).

In Nicaragua, the US government authorized the CIA to covertly support Violeta Chamorro's conservative newspaper, *La Prensa* when the democratically elected Sandinista government came to power in 1978 (Nichols, 1988: 34-35). This allowed the US to utilize the media as an important instrument of psychological warfare during their lengthy proxy war against the Sandinistas (Robinson and Norsworthy, 1987: 203-208). In 1990, Chamorro went on to become the Nicaraguan president. It appears that the primary reason for the US opposing the Sandinista government was that they were 'too

democratic' and '[t]his empowerment was seen by the United States as a threat, a dangerously attractive model for other peoples' (Robinson, 1992: 152). Thus, after the establishment of the NED in 1983, opposition funding (or 'democracy promotion') was switched from covert to overt delivery mechanisms. To justify continued support of the CIA-backed *La Prensa* the NED portrayed it as a 'struggling 'independent' news outlet,' and in the three years before the 1990 elections *La Prensa* received almost US\$1 million from the NED (Robinson, 1992: 79, 81). In 1988, the NED also began funding an Independent Radios Project which provided funding for four radio stations: *Radio Corporacion, Radio Mundial, Radio Dario, and Radio San Cristobal* (Robinson, 1992: 82). In the year prior to the 1990 elections, the NED also submitted a proposal for a media project entitled *Independent TV Programming: A Must for the Nicaraguan Opposition* which outlined the ability of the proposed programs to "serve as a catalyst for Nicaraguans to begin demonstrating their displeasure with the present state of affairs' (Robinson, 1992: 84). In addition to promoting 'independent' media within Nicaragua, the NED also funded many media enterprises outside of Nicaragua. Freedom House, a US based NGO, administered most of these grants and they received approximately US\$1 million to create an anti-Sandinista publishing house (*Libro Libre*), think-tank (CINCO), and quarterly journal (*Pensamiento Centroamericano*) in San Jose, Costa Rica (Robinson, 1992: 78-79). Freedom House also received around US\$3 million from the NED between 1984 and 1989 to propagate anti-Sandinista viewpoints within the US media (Robinson, 1992: 79). A comprehensive examination of the domestic and international propaganda campaign waged against the Sandinistas by the US media is provided by Herman & Chomsky (1988: 116-142) and Robinson (1992: 77-87).

Current grantee data, obtained from the NED's online Democracy Projects Database, showed that in 2003 US\$4.9 million was distributed by the NED for 'Media and Publishing' projects. A further US\$5 million of multiple use grants were also issued to undertake Media and Publishing work alongside other 'democracy promoting' activities (nearly a fifth of these grants – US\$900,000 worth – were used to support media projects). This means, that in 2003 the total NED funds used to support independent media were just under US\$5.7 million, or fourteen percent of the total NED grants. To put this figure into context, more than US\$1 billion would need to be given to independent media outlets in the US to have the same per capita influence. It is worth noting that the largest multiple use grants, not included in the US\$5.7 million total, were still used to support important media projects in China and Afghanistan. Thus, part of a US\$530,000 grant to China will be used to publish a new Chinese-language online periodical, *Journal of Private Enterprise* and a portion of a US\$225,000 grant to Afghanistan will be used to support the Afghan Media Resource Center and the center's daily newspaper *Erada*.

### **Internews and Telesur: Independent Media or Government Propaganda?**

One of the largest independent media agencies with a long history of collaboration with the US government (and the NED) is the Internews Network, which has trained over 22,000 media professionals since it was created in 1992. Like the NED, Internews is an 'independent', non-profit, quasi non-governmental organisation that receives most of its funding from the US

government (80 percent of its annual US\$20 million budget), with the rest coming from private donations (like AOL/TimeWarner and General Electric, see Internews' website). To many observers, the objective of promoting independent media seems like a laudable goal. Unfortunately, all too often, it seems that these promotional activities require the development of a special brand of 'independent media,' that is, media which is independent – or free of – any questioning of US media hegemony. David Hoffman, President of Internews, considers his network to play a crucial role in the 'war of ideas' which he believes should rely upon the 'two pillars of American democracy – free enterprise and free media'; which according to many media scholars, is more likely to be undermining American democracy, rather than strengthening it (e.g. Berry & Theobald, 2006).

Strong criticisms of Internews' strategies to promote US foreign policy interests in the war of words have come from President Putin of Russia, President Lukashenko of Belarus, President Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, and President Karimov of Uzbekistan who argue that Internews, along with other foreign NGOs, are undertaking illegal activities in manipulating their political systems. This has led some of them to clamp down on the ability of foreign financed NGOs to operate within their countries (Gershman, 2005), as such selectively backed NGO's are considered to play an important role in what has been referred to as 'post-modern coups' evidenced by the recent 'coloured revolutions' in Eastern Europe (Mowat, 2005). Writing in the NED-funded Journal of Democracy, McFaul (2005: 11) highlights the NED's support of independent media as a 'critical element' in the success of the colour revolutions 'in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine' due to their ability to positively 'publicize mounting popular protests.'

The contradictory nature of US media policies recently came to light with the launch of the Latin American TV channel Telesur. This venture was initiated in July 2005 by a collective effort between Venezuelan, Argentinean, Cuban, Uruguayan and Brazilian governments – although 70 percent of the US\$10 million start-up costs came from Venezuela. Telesur has been accused of being a front for anti-US propaganda and the House of Representatives has 'vot[ed] to enable the US to broadcast its own signals into Venezuela in retaliation' (Daniels, 2005). Problematically, for both Telesur and transnational elite interests, Telesur is attempting to promote the 'wrong' kind of democracy, that is, participatory popular democracy. The Chávez government has also been condemned in the US for its domestic media policies, which have been widely reported to be hostile to 'freedom of expression' (Delacour, 2005). At the same time, the NED has more than doubled its aid for the Instituto de Prensa y Sociedad (Press and Society Institute) from US\$44,000 in 2003 to US\$110,000 in 2004, which is a society that aims to 'construct a network of alerts in Venezuela to report attacks and threats against journalists' and to 'work with international and regional organizations dedicated to freedom of expression' (www.ned.org). However, contrary to this criticism of the Venezuelan media, it seems that the (so-called pro-Chávez) media played a central role as the 'main conspirator' in fermenting the 2002 coup against Chávez (Castillo, 2003: 154). The pro-Chávez citizens who led the counter-coup even 'targeted the offices of the media, especially television' for their protests, instead of the opposition parties headquarters (Castillo, 2003: 149). Castillo (2003: 151) also described

how the Venezuelan media was indirectly supported in its campaign to oust Chávez by 'some sections of the international media,' which suggests that the US government is promoting 'democratic media reforms' in the wrong country. A broad collection of scholars and activists have already reached this conclusion and in March 2006 they launched a group called the International Endowment for Democracy ([www.iefd.org](http://www.iefd.org)), which aims to promote democracy where they consider it is needed most, the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Although the US's 'democracy promotion' initiatives may be the best funded, they are only one part of the problem as non-profit organisations replicating the NED's functions operate all over the world. These groups may choose to differ in tactical preferences, but the available evidence indicates, that most of them promote the interests of transnational elites and global capitalism.

Unfortunately, there is almost no public dialogue surrounding these new insidious forms of 'democratic interventions,' especially in the mass media. For example to date, no one other than Barker (2006) has critically evaluated the activities of the Australian equivalent to the NED, the Centre for Democratic Institutions. The lack of debate is not due to any lack of evidence, as the democratic deficit of the NED's activities were amply illustrated when the US General Accounting Office was asked by the House Foreign Affairs Committee to investigate the NED's work. However, their critical report was then muzzled by higher powers, so that, ironically the NED 'prompted the undermining of an action necessary to ensure [its] accountability' (Corn, 1997). Public relations scholar Dutta-Bergman concludes that:

'The ultimate irony of the project of [democracy promotion in] civil society is the way in which the project pushes a dominant public sphere that serves the interests of the transnational hegemony and co-opts the participatory power of subaltern people.' (Dutta-Bergman, 2005: 284). Professor William I. Robinson believes 'that exposing and denouncing and fighting against this new type of intervention should top the agenda of the global social justice movement and of international solidarity work' (Robinson and Gindin, 2005). This might prove difficult within the confines of our current corporate media systems. Therefore, any efforts to bring 'democracy promotion' and the 'promotion of independent media' and its undemocratic nature into the public sphere should be carried out alongside efforts to reform the mass media itself.

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