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Disseminating information through media for governance and electoral change

Free access to trusted and uncensored information is thought to hold governments accountable and support democracy, human rights, and sustainable development. [1,2] The dissemination of information to educate people on democratic processes and civic values through free channels of information is thought to help to overcome the low rate of free access to information around the world. For example, access to information through free and independent media might reduce corruption through government accountability and transparency. [3]

This brief summarizes key findings and observations from impact evaluations (IEs) looking at the effect of disseminating information through media on governance and electoral outcomes from the *Independent media and the free flow of information evidence gap map,* (hereafter referred to as the Independent Media EGM). The topic was selected based on the availability of evidence and the priorities of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) democracy, human rights, and governance (DRG) technical experts. The intended audience is DRG practitioners, with a focus on practical information and considerations to inform the planning and implementation of DRG programming and research. The brief, thus, does not synthesize or quantify intervention effect sizes (as in a systematic review (SR)), nor does it replace the need for rigorous evaluation of DRG programming.

USAID commissioned the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) to develop an evidence gap map (EGM) that visually represents evidence of effectiveness through a framework of interventions and outcomes. The EGM focuses on interventions associated with independent media development in low- and middle-income countries, and their impacts on peacebuilding and democratization.

Did you know ?

- Free access to information is severely challenged in most regions of the world. Depending on the metrics used, only 13–50% of the world's population had access to independent information as of 2016. [4]
- From 2014 to 2019, Freedom House's press freedom scores declined by 9% in Eurasia, 11% in the Middle East and North Africa, and 8% in Europe, but increased by 3% in sub-Saharan Africa. [5]

Key messages

For practitioners

- Findings from the included systematic reviews suggest that interventions providing information on public officers' performance do not have an effect on intermediate or final outcomes; interventions providing information on citizens' rights might improve access to services. Media for peace interventions may improve trust outcomes.
- When implementing media interventions to support fair elections and reduce corruption, consider social norms and logistical barriers.
- Consider the appropriate timing of when to disseminate information, especially around upcoming elections, as this might affect people's behaviors.
- Disclosing information on politicians' activities ideally should be done by amplifying the information through accessible and uncensored media, and ensuring adequate intensity of media coverage.
- Delivering innovative civic education content to challenge listeners' beliefs should be done by keeping it independent from government bodies and politicians, and ensuring a gender-sensitive approach in the design and implementation of the project.

For learning specialists and researchers

- Evaluation of similar interventions in similar contexts should be established. This is of particular interest for internet-based interventions as these are becoming easier to implement.
- Given that the adoption of one-time behaviors and long-term change is not the same, evaluation periods should be extended if authors wish to establish shifts in societal norms.
- Cost evidence is lacking. Cost-effectiveness should be established.

How we conceptualize independent media ⚓

Independent media refers to media and journalists that are independent of governmental, political, and commercial interests or control.[6] Many interventions target independent media development, trying to create media that are independent, pluralistic, and professional.[7] Although some of these interventions develop media as an end in itself, many use various media (e.g. TV, radio, messaging campaigns) as a means to achieve desired social outcomes. They share the common aim of supporting good governance and government accountability,[8] which is crucial for peacebuilding and democratization.

About the effects of these interventions 📄

To strengthen independent media, interventions with solid evidence should be funded and those with unknown effects should be further studied. However, there has been no comprehensive systematic map to represent studies that evaluate the wide range of interventions and outcomes addressing independent media development.

The EGM includes a broad set of media types, including TV, newspaper, radio, websites, leaflets, and SMS (text messaging). This brief focuses on newspapers, radio, TV, movies and videos, and online content (e.g. websites). These were selected because they have a similar theory of change and means of engagement with the audience. We present the results of these studies according to the types of messages disseminated; namely, information on corruption and elections, disclosure of government activities, and general civic education projects on political knowledge and democratic values.

Table 1 shows a framework of interventions and outcomes in the EGM. Highlights in blue indicate the focus areas of this brief.

Table 1: Interventions and outcomes framework

Intervention groups

Information dissemination, and peace and democratic messaging includes interventions:

- aiming to create and disseminate content related to peacebuilding; accountability; transparency; democracy promotion; media laws and standards; and
- media literacy training of citizens, civil society organizations, and government stakeholders

Capacity building and technical support

Institutional and regulatory environment

Media protection services

Relationships and coalition building

Outcome categories

Newsroom professionalization outcomes measuring:

- journalism skills of journalists and editors (e.g. reporting skills); capacity to maintain media industry standards; extent to which investigative journalism is conducted; and financial sustainability of media

Governance and democratization outcomes measuring:

- media literacy skills of citizens, civil society organizations, and government stakeholders; perceptions, social norms, attitudes and beliefs; participation in media coalitions
- representation and inclusion of vulnerable groups in media content

Human security and resilience outcomes assessing people's economic, health, educational, and environmental security

Community and societal participation

Enabling environment

Social cohesion

Violence reduction

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## What do we know? Where are the gaps?[9]

The Independent Media EGM includes a total of 92 papers: 88 quantitative IEs), two, 2 qualitative IEs, and two systematic reviews SRs. The earliest publication year of the studies was 2007. In the following years, publication numbers fluctuated but have steadily increased since 2017 (from 5 to 14 studies in 2020).[9] Sub-Saharan Africa was the most frequent geographical focus of the studies. Over half the countries identified in the EGM showed substantial constraints on press freedom, rated as having "difficult" (75%) or "very serious" ("(3%) press freedom situations as categorized by Reporters Without Borders.[10] Of the 18 low- and middle-income countries with the lowest press freedom rating ("very serious" situation), 3 countries – People's Republic of China, Iran, and Vietnam – were represented among the included papers.[11]

Around one-fourth of the studies falling under the interventions category 'disseminating media content on accountability and democracy promotion' in the Independent Media EGM (n=20) assessed the impacts of interventions associated with radio (n=5), online content (n=5), newspapers (n=4), and movies and videos (n=3) only or combined more than one of the above-listed media types (n=3). All 20 of these studies focused on delivering information through media. The information disseminated was generally related to corruption and elections, government activities, and general education on politics and democratic values. The studies mainly measured impacts on civic participation in democracy and governance, democratic beliefs, norms and behaviors, access to public services, justice, human rights, and political security. No reported outcomes related to community and societal participation, enabling environment, social cohesion, or violence reduction (see Figure 1).

Figure 3: Using evidence in activity design
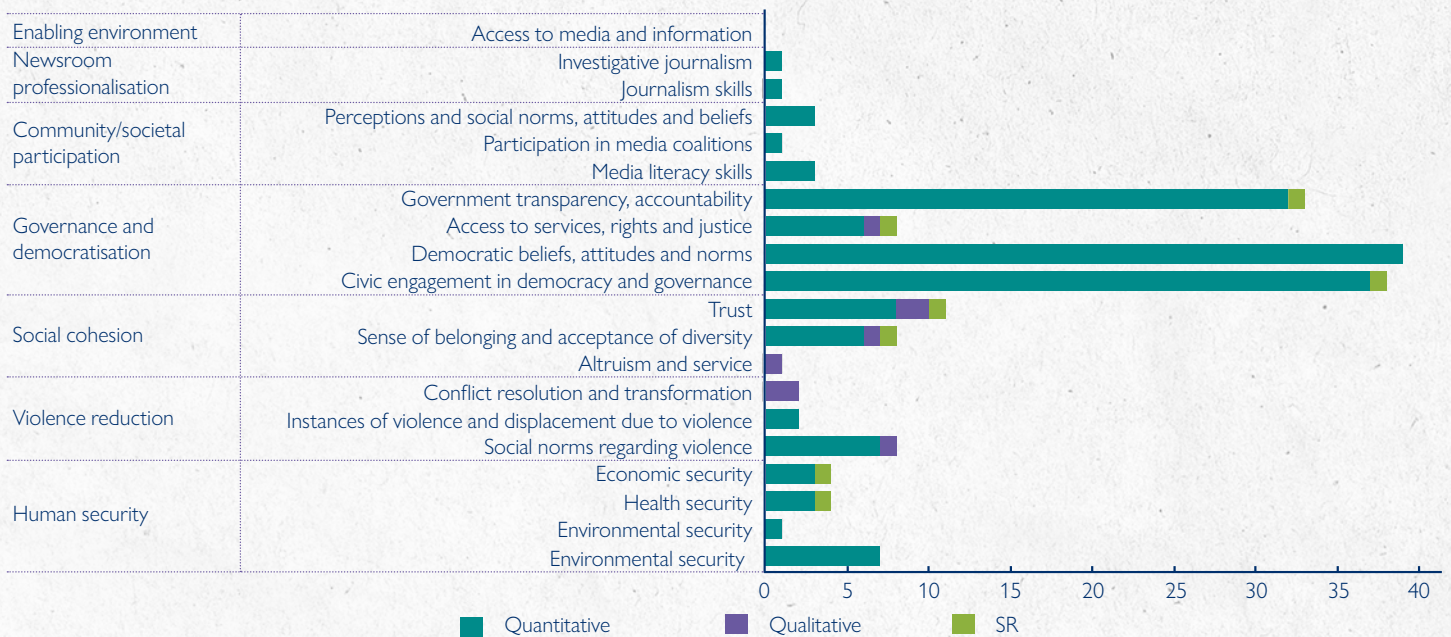
Source: 3ie. Note: Multi-coding was allowed for studies if they focused on more than one outcome listed in the EGM's inclusion criteria.

Lessons learned from the included systematic review

Two relevant systematic reviews were identified which synthesized evidence on disseminating information for democracy[12] and peacebuilding.[13]

Findings from Waddington and colleagues (2019) suggest that information provided to citizens on the performance of public servants generally does not improve intermediate or final outcomes, except for some small improvements in politicians' performance. These interventions might work better when those actors whose performance is evaluated are willing to facilitate the intervention. The review also looked at the effects of providing information to citizens on their rights and found that they seem to improve active participation in civil life and knowledge about services they can use. The facilitators factors include the availability of citizens to utilize front-line service providers to access the services, the development of shared knowledge among citizens and providers on citizens' rights, and the development of an adequate level of social sanction risk for providers.

Sonnenfeld and colleagues (2021) suggests that media per peace interventions impact trust outcomes by activating the 'seeing the other' mechanism, through which people better understand and respect differences and similarities with others. However, the evidence is limited as it was some impact only on trust outcomes. No effects were found on any of the four measures on 'acceptance of diversity' synthesized by the authors (intergroup tolerance, rejection of multiple perspectives, feelings of exclusive victimhood, feelings of inclusive victimhood).

Considerations for implementation

Key messages

When the intervention is...	And you want to accomplish this...	Consider doing this...
Disseminating information about corruption and elections	→ Reducing corruption and avoiding the re-election of corrupt politicians	→ Recognize and address the perception of social norms and logistical barriers to simplify the reporting process. Strategically time election campaigns—a few days before elections—so corrupt politicians have fewer chances to avoid electoral sanctions.
Disclosing information on government activities	→ Keeping politicians more accountable	→ If possible, carefully select media outlets that are free and uncensored.
General civic education on political knowledge and democratic values	→ Increasing political participation, and attitudes toward democratic values, and allowing people to exercise their rights	→ Ensure a gender-sensitive approach is followed in the design and implementation of the intervention. Deliver innovative civic education content to challenge listeners' beliefs, including through partisan media. Keep the content of the civic education program independent from government bodies and politicians.

Corruption and elections

Perceptions that normalize corruption can be reduced through the influence of role models and peers. Often, corruption is not denounced because people think it is pointless and/or dangerous. However, changing norms can change behavior, especially if messages are transmitted through people with high status within a community. In Nigeria, a film with famous actors who denounced corruption alongside an SMS campaign initiated just after showing the movie increased citizen reporting of corruption; however, it is not clear whether this behavior would continue after the end of the campaign. An intervention that successfully encourages a behavior for the first time may not result in long-term behavior change.

Peer influence can also have an effect. In Mozambique, receiving messages from older men or peers as a reminder to vote and report electoral problems, in addition to a parallel newspaper campaign inviting people to get out to vote, highlighted how important it is to provide platforms for peer influence to amplify political participation.[14] However, this study was rated as having a high risk of bias, mainly due to a lack of clarity around attrition and spillover or contamination.

Providing information on how to report corruption and irregularities can facilitate the reporting of these irregularities. In Nigeria, text messages with information on a simple way to report corruption helped to eliminate the logistical barrier of how to report corruption activities.[15] Internet and social networks such as Facebook can be another simple way for citizens to monitor corruption as they can offer crowdsourcing opportunities for oversight; for instance, the

Colombia elections, as discussed in a study of a large-scale social media advertising campaign on Facebook.[16] In Mozambique, a study considered how newspapers inviting people to vote and reminding them of an available hotline service to report electoral irregularities can affect voter choices.[17]

The timing of when information on corruption is disseminated shortly before an election can affect election results. Implementing a radio advertisement discouraging support for vote buyers just three days before the election leaves little time for political responses and people can be less easily confused/misled. One study on corruption audits disseminated through online and media outlets showed how leaving time between the disclosure of a corruption and the election allows politicians to pay attention to voters' behaviors and modify their own behavior accordingly. For instance, the politicians might cloud the voters' ability to attribute responsibility to them—such as by joining different political parties and masking themselves.[18]

The level of corruption disclosed can influence people's behaviors in unexpected ways. In Brazil, one study found that disclosing a high level of corruption equated to the highest average tax revenue loss; disclosing medium levels of corruption had no effect; and low corruption levels increased tax revenue when the information was disseminated just before the election.[19] The reduced tax collection revenues resulted in communities adopting a participatory budgeting approach. However, effects may dissipate over time.

Disclosing information on government activities

Media can reduce information asymmetries in the political process by amplifying political information, but it needs to be accessible and uncensored. In Brazil, the release of information about politicians' misuse of public funds had different effects in settings where radio was available.[20] Use of the internet to amplify information on corruption is only possible in countries where it is uncensored.[21] Therefore, use of trusted media sources can facilitate trust in institutions and political participation.[22] Better access to trusted information can also help to improve public services. In Uganda, two studies found that a newspaper campaign about the timing and amount of capitation grants that the central government disbursed to school districts allowed civil society to better monitor the disbursement of the funds and improve school enrollment, but limited effects were observed on students' learning achievements.[23]

Disseminating information on political performance could cause ethnic divisions or force politicians to be conformist. In Benin, disseminating videos on the performance of incumbents in the National Assembly tended to accentuate ethnic divides.[24] Voters only rewarded good-performing co-ethnics and only punished incumbents of other ethnicities who performed badly. Additional information campaigns that can disempower the notion of ethnic ties may be necessary alongside such campaigns. In Vietnam, creating and disseminating scorecards for politicians, which reported the number of queries they asked in assemblies, forced delegates to act in a conformist manner, with larger effects in areas with higher internet penetration and higher access to the scorecards.[25]

General education on political and democratic values

Civic education can maintain or reinforce gender gaps. Improving communication access through radio governance in seven countries (Bangladesh, Kenya, Myanmar, Nepal, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania) highlighted how women increased the number of political discussions they had and their political participation; but men showed a greater improvement, reinforcing the gap between genders in the outcomes. However, this study was rated as having a high risk of bias mainly due to the lack of a well-constructed counterfactual.[26] In rural villages in India, movies informing people about their rights under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act of 2005 improved participants' knowledge of their rights but did not change social norms that limit women's participation in the workforce.[27] This was likely due to the movies being led by male actors and participants in the intervention mostly being men.

Two studies in Ghana found that partisan media moderate extreme views by exposing citizens to alternative perspectives, favoring a democratic environment, especially in post-liberalization settings where political actors and parties are new. In Ghana, two treatments of exposure to partisan media and cross-cutting media ameliorated opposite partisans' political attitudes.[28] Cross-cutting media encouraged moderation, especially in those subjects who were less politically knowledgeable and with **fewer partisan attachments and less political sophistication.** However, more knowledgeable individuals may have been better equipped to resist persuasion by opposite sources. Another intervention in Ghana that exposed participants to debates centered on policy, caused partisan participants to express more favorable attitudes toward candidates from other parties and to be less likely to want to vote for co-partisan candidates.[29]

An online civic education campaign in Tunisia for young social media users that focused on deprivation in human rights resulting from authoritarian support, and the benefits of a democratic system and democratic procedures, increased electoral registration, political efficacy, and political campaign engagement.[30] However, the results should be interpreted with caution because this study was rated as having a high risk of bias, mainly due to the experimental design, which minimized confounding and outcome measurement bias.

Different results were found in Ghana where an intervention that exposed participants to pro-government, pro-opposition, or neutral talk shows did not change participants' perceptions of electoral malpractices and acceptability of malpractice norms.[31] This was likely due to the participants already being familiar with the discussed malfeasance.

Emphasizing that an intervention is independent of government bodies or politicians can keep participants more engaged. In an online news campaign about social and political issues, participants felt freer to ask sensitive political questions to the implementing organization, especially in an authoritarian regime such as China.[32] The intervention increased political participation but did not affect political attitudes toward democracy, likely due to the short period of intervention and online language barriers.

Implications for researchers

Key messages ⭐

- The evaluation of similar interventions in similar contexts should be established. This is of particular interest for internet-based interventions as these are becoming easier to implement.
- Because adoption of one-time behaviors and of long-term change are not the same, evaluation periods should be extended if authors wish to establish shifts in societal norms.
- Cost evidence is lacking. Cost effectiveness should be established.

The EGMs identify where future research may need to concentrate and thus generate new evidence that informs researchers to evaluate future interventions. This brief includes 20 studies that generally have a low risk of bias; only four studies have a high risk of bias.

Evaluations of similar interventions in similar contexts could establish replicability. Several authors argue that their findings are generalizable to similar contexts. For example, authors of a study on an online civic education campaign posit that results can be generalized to other democratic settings where ethnic identities are salient and there is limited access to information about the incumbent leader. These traits characterize many democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.[33] In another study, an intervention in China allowing people living in remote areas to read online news increased support for liberal and democratic values.[34] Authors argued that these findings might apply to similar authoritarian regimes with significant censorship. However, they also indicated that internal and external validity need to be established by scaling the intervention and taking it directly to (or near) participants' homes. As internet-based interventions become more common, their generalizability may be of particular interest.[34,35] The internet is rapidly spreading in numerous settings, making implementation of interventions through social networks and other internet platforms easier and more common.

Sustainability of outcomes in the long term is often not measured and remains unclear. Interventions that disseminate content through the media on governance and democratic values overall seem to work in the short term. But it is not clear how long exposure to online news, disclosure of government expenditures online, or virtual civic education courses might affect people's choices.[36,37,38,39] Because the adoption of a one-off behavior is different than sustained change, impacts may diminish over the long term. People's memories may fade, or they may become accustomed to information.

More studies could report information on the costs of the intervention. Only two studies directly presented the costs of their intervention (n=2).[40,41] Two more conducted informal cost-effectiveness analyses, but the quality of these analyses is low (n=2).[42,43] Reporting cost information or cost-effectiveness analysis results can be useful for practitioners and researchers in designing and implementing information dissemination interventions in similar settings.

About the evidence

Figure 2: What types of evidence are included in this brief?

Evidence type	M&E indicators and project reports	Performance and process evaluations	Impact Evaluations (IEs)	Systematic Review (SRs)
Key question	WHAT was done?	HOW was it done?	Did it have an EFFECT?	Were the effects CONTEXT dependent?
Use(s) of findings	Help guide program implementation and course correction and demonstrate accountability.	Multiple purposes; e.g. program adherence to the plan; implementer performance; achievement of planned outputs and immediate outcomes; stakeholder/ partner/client feedback, etc.)	To measure intervention effectiveness, after accounting for other factors; published IEs provide examples of interventions that have or have not had an impact on a targeted outcome. They can be quantitative (experimental and quasi-experimental methods); or qualitative (i.e. realist evaluations, process tracing, outcome harvesting, etc.)	To synthesize findings from multiple IEs (often through quantitative meta-analysis) on a particular issue, increasing confidence and generalizability.
Included in EGM	No	No	Yes	Yes[9]

In effectiveness evidence from IEs and SRs, **negative findings are just as important** as positive ones because they help to refine our understanding of what works (or not, and why or why not). In addition, the **absence of effectiveness evidence does not mean an intervention should be avoided**, but rather highlights the potential benefit of an IE, particularly if the intervention:

- is innovative,
- can be scaled up, and
- is being considered as a potential model for replication elsewhere.

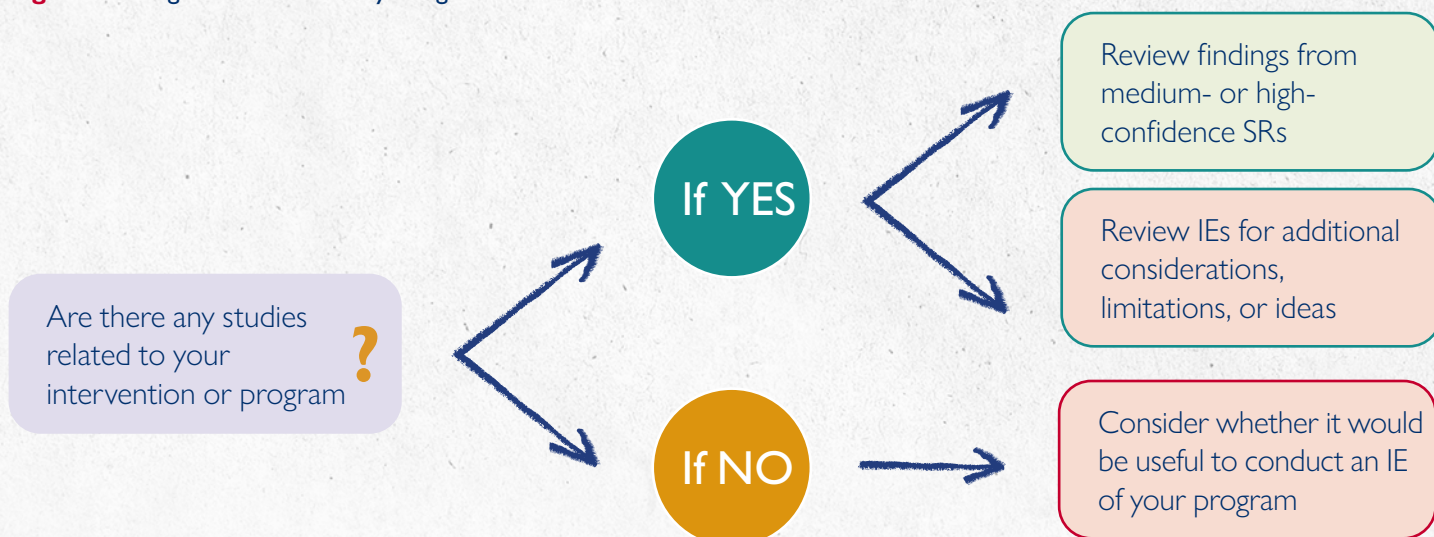## Why is this important for practioners? ⚠️

Along with the associated EGM matrix and report, this brief is designed to inform USAID practitioners' investments in interventions using newspapers, radio, TV, movies and videos, and online content at multiple phases of the program cycle, including strategic planning; project design and implementation; activity design and implementation; monitoring and evaluation.

■ Results will feed into the **technical evidence** base in the **learning** phase of USAID's Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting (CLA) Framework.

■ IE findings provide USAID practitioners with ideas about which interventions they may want to consider when developing a **program design**.

We encourage practitioners to take a closer look at the online EGM[44] to engage with the available evidence (Figure 2). The EGM includes SRs , which may include an explanation of relevant theories of change, and can be useful during the project and activity design stage. In SRs, the more consistent the findings are across contexts, the higher the likelihood is that the approach could work in a similar context.

Figure 3: Using evidence in activity design

Are there any studies related to your intervention or program **?**

If YES
- Review findings from medium- or high-confidence SRs
- Review IEs for additional considerations, limitations, or ideas

If NO
- Consider whether it would be useful to conduct an IE of your program

You can always reach out to independent media experts at ddi.drg.elmaillist@usaid.gov. if you have any questions, ideas, or suggestions related to evidence that may help inform the design of your project(s) and/or activity(ies).

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About the brief ⓘ

This brief draws on 20 quantitative impact evaluations and one systematic review, which looked at interventions associated with the following media types: newspapers, radio, TV, movies and videos, and online content. Generally, disseminating information on accountability and democratization to people enables better access to credible information, which can support peacebuilding and democratization in countries.

The studies on which this brief is based were identified through the *Independent media evidence gap map (EGM)* by Miriam Berretta and colleagues. The authors systematically searched for published and unpublished IEs and SRs through the second quarter of 2021, identifying, mapping, and describing the evidence base of interventions associated with independent media development in L&MICs.

The EGM contains a total of 92 studies; 88 were quantitative IEs, 2 were qualitative IEs, and 2 systematic reviews. The characteristics of the evidence are described and mapped according to a framework of 26 interventions and 28 outcomes, with 5 cross-cutting themes. The EGM can be viewed at https://developmentevidence.3ieimpact.org/egm/independent-media-egm.

This brief was authored by Miriam Berretta, Charlotte Lane, Sangha Lee, Katherine Quant, Ingunn Storhaug, and Douglas Glandon. They are solely responsible for all content, errors, and omissions. It was designed and produced by Akarsh Gupta and Tanvi Lal.

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