

Changes in media reporting after Right to Information Laws in Queensland

POLICY BRIEF

A number of African and Asia-Pacific states are introducing freedom of information laws to give effect to the 'public right to know'; combat perceptions of government corruption and a lack of government transparency. In designing Freedom of Information regimes, African and Asian states have the advantage of drawing on the experiences of other nation states, such as Australia, which have implemented successful FoI regimes.

A frequently overlooked aspect of implementing FoI is media coverage and the capacity of journalists to maximise the usefulness of government information. The aforementioned paper reviewed media coverage of Australian Freedom of Information reforms in 2009 to identify potential tensions between the government agency culture and reporting practices of Australian journalists. The study reveals both qualitative and quantitative shifts in media reporting of Freedom of Information after comprehensive legal reforms in 2009. The findings offer insights into the role of newspapers in promoting and/or framing the public sector information environment, which might benefit African and Asia states as they work towards implementation of FoI laws.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

<Recommendation 1>

Educate journalists on the importance of Freedom of Information laws.

<Recommendation 2>

Using the repeatable methodology developed by Breit, Fitzgerald, Liu and Neal (2011), undertake research to ascertain whether Africa and Asian or international journalists are reporting FoI as a news issue in its own right.

<Recommendation 3>

Undertake a focused government portfolio study into government agency culture to ascertain capacity of FoI administrators to work with journalists to promote public right to know.

Recommendation 4>

Develop educational program for FoI administrators.

1-5 Key recommendations or findings

AUTHORS

First author & contact:

Rhonda Breit, LLB, PhD, r.breit@uq.edu.au. Acting Head, School of Journalism and Communication, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia 4072.

Other authors

Richard Fitzgerald

Shuang Liu

Regan Neal.

Justification for each of the recommendations (no more than 750 words in total)

Recommendation 1 & 2: Our study reveals that journalists play an important role in converting government information into stories that are useful and meaningful to the public. Therefore, they can play a crucial role in putting pressure on governments to implement Freedom of Information laws. However, the role of the media in shaping and framing the culture of Freedom of Information is often overlooked. Therefore, it is important,

journalists are trained in Freedom of Information and its importance in promoting the public right to know. This is particularly pertinent in the Africa, Asia region, which are still implementing Freedom of Information regimes. The repeatable methodology developed by Breit et al (2012) can be used to gauge journalists' knowledge and ability to report freedom of information as a news story in its own right. Feedback from this research can be used to design and implement journalists training.

Recommendation 3 & 4: The relationship between journalists and Public Information Administrators (PSI) is also overlooked. Our study revealed that FoI and RTI work best where journalists and agencies worked together collaboratively. Therefore, research is needed to garner insights into PSI administrators' attitudes towards journalists and their capacity to promote the public right to know through cooperation and collaboration with journalists. Based on feedback from this research, educational programs for PSI administrators could be designed.