

American University in Cairo

## AUC Knowledge Fountain

---

Faculty Journal Articles

---

Spring 3-18-2019

### Media Independence as a Prerequisite for Good Governance: Is it an Illusion?

Laila El Baradei

American University in Cairo, lbaradei@aucegypt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_journal\\_articles](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles)



Part of the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

##### APA Citation

Baradei, L. (2019). Media Independence as a Prerequisite for Good Governance: Is it an Illusion?. *PATIMES*,

[https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_journal\\_articles/4415](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4415)

##### MLA Citation

Baradei, Laila El "Media Independence as a Prerequisite for Good Governance: Is it an Illusion?." *PATIMES*, 2019,

[https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty\\_journal\\_articles/4415](https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_journal_articles/4415)

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact [fountadmin@aucegypt.edu](mailto:fountadmin@aucegypt.edu).

This is an author's draft of an article published in the PA Times.

The final version, the version of record, is available online at:

<https://patimes.org/media-independence-as-a-prerequisite-for-good-governance-is-it-an-illusion/>



## Media Independence as a Prerequisite for Good Governance: Is it an Illusion?

Media Independence may be a topic more likely studied in journalism and mass communication schools, yet discussions of good and responsive governance always point to media independence as the main prerequisite. Without media independence, and without the media acting as a watchdog over government's performance, it would be very difficult to ensure the efficiency, effectiveness and responsiveness of our government organizations. **However, the question remains whether media organizations are ever truly independent and objective—whose interests do they serve?**

We can start by trying to define what is meant by media independence. The concept of media independence is loaded and merits more in-depth analysis to figure out whose independence, from what, and by which means, as discussed for example by Karppinen and Moe in 2016. However, a basic attempt at utilization of the term implies that there is no pressure exerted on media organizations of any sort, so that they are capable of relaying the truth without bias, that ownership is set at a distance from operation and management and that media organizations are not censored, blocked or forced by governments of the countries they are operating within to either change, tweak the news, present one side of the story or advocate for one cause rather than another. In the following brief article, we will examine four different scenarios and examples:

1. When media is operating in a non-democratic context.
2. When operating in the land of assumed freedom in the United States.
3. The case of the BBC.
4. When large social media organizations fail us.

The answer to our question is clear when media organizations are operating under autocratic regimes. We have all heard of governments having continuing practices that block news websites, censor published material, check the content of talk shows on T.V., ban the hosting of specific guests in the media, have its intelligence agencies buy out private media organizations and turn them into propaganda machines, not allow the licensing of opposition led newspapers or T.V. channels and legislate very restrictive operating procedures for the use of social media under the pretext of ethical controls. The list goes on depending on the level of autocracy and may include the arresting and persecution of independent authors and the disappearance of some. The end result of such a context is that the level of government autocracy tends to increase since media can no longer hold it accountable.

What is interesting, however, as discussed in the literature, is that media independence may not be an easy feat, even in well-established democracies. We all know of the claimed biases in opinions associated with CNN versus Fox News, for example. These biases are well documented, although the said agencies operate in the country of claimed, "Liberty, freedom and the pursuit of happiness." The debate is no longer whether they are biased or not, but for whom and to what extent. United States citizens always need to dig out behind the ownership and management structure of media organizations to better understand whose interests are being served.

The next highly acclaimed model of media independence is the British BBC, which has an ownership structure that guarantees its continued objectivity. Founded in 1922, it has a unique financing system based on license fees collected from consumers for the broadcasting receivers they use. Thus it enables its operation without a need for ads, and with a great deal of independence from shareholders' and/or political interests. Interestingly though, according to Media Bias Fact Check Resource in 2018, even the BBC was found to be, "Left-Center biased based on story selection!"

The last fort for media independence lies with the newest forms of social media that supposedly have greater control on how to portray their news and select their content. Lately, we have started to see

that this promised utopian model of social media independence is also failing its citizens. A blatant recent example in February 2019 being when Netflix, the internet movie company, was asked by Saudi Arabia to remove an episode in one of its series relating to Saudi crown prince MBS. Netflix complied with the request simply because they want to keep their market share. The frowned-upon episode was banned from Saudi Arabia but was allowed in other parts of the world.

When we teach about Public Policy and Administration to students using American textbooks, we preach about the importance of democracy and democratic principles. **The assumption held by Western democracies is that we cannot have an effective, efficient and responsive government if we do not operate within a democratic context. We assume we also can't have it if we do not enjoy freedom of speech and independence of media organizations. But is media independence and objectivity possible, or is it an elusive goal?**