

The State of Press Freedom in Uganda

MEGHAN SOBEL COHEN
Regis University, USA

KAREN MCINTYRE
Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

The press-freedom landscape in Uganda is one of unique contradictions. On one hand, Uganda is said to have one of the most free and active media landscapes in Central and East Africa, and courts regularly rule in favor of journalists' rights. On the other hand, an array of legal and extralegal mechanisms continues to limit free expression. In-depth interviews with Ugandan journalists revealed that journalists face dangers if they report critically about the president or his inner circle, but they simultaneously play a role in the limited press freedom. Findings from this study suggest that the actions of journalists have not been sufficiently factored into media development theory and propose that while the political science framework of the safety valve may be at play, Uganda is undergoing the process of journalistic domestication.

Keywords: press freedom, Uganda, journalism, interviews

Uganda is a country of unique contradictions when it comes to press freedom. On the one hand, Uganda is said to have one of the most free and active media landscapes in Central and East Africa, and courts regularly rule in favor of journalists' rights (Freedom House, 2017). On the other hand, an array of legal and extralegal mechanisms continues to limit free expression. Freedom House (2017) said that the Ugandan government and press have "settled into a predictable relationship" where the government sporadically "lashes out" at the media in various ways, but "such heavy-handed actions tend not to permanently disrupt operations" (para. 6).

The nation has seen impressive social and economic progress since its civil war in the 1980s (World Bank, 2009), but it still faces an array of development challenges (United Nations, 2014), including those that affect the journalism industry. Media development theory (McQuail, 1983) suggests that in times of development, "social responsibility comes before media rights and freedoms" (p. 151). In other words, sometimes the press must accept restrictions and governmental guidelines help the country develop (McQuail, 1983, 2010). This study analyzes the press-freedom landscape in Uganda from the perspective of media development theory, but also, in an effort to push the boundaries of media development theory by

Meghan Sobel Cohen: msobel@regis.edu

Karen McIntyre: kemcintyre@vcu.edu

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using an interdisciplinary framework, views the data from a political science lens to understand whether a safety valve situation is occurring in the Ugandan media environment—that is, journalists and citizens are being given just enough space for freedom of expression that they continue on, but no changes occur to the existing social and political structures (Buehler, 2013; MacKinnon, 2008). We first review the relevant history of Uganda and expand on the theoretical framework before detailing the status of press freedom in the country based on journalists' perceptions gathered through in-depth interviews.

Background

Ugandan Political and Media History

Uganda saw its first newspapers in the early 1900s, brought to the country by missionaries (Isoba, 1980). The first privately owned commercial newspaper, *The Uganda Herald*, was established in 1912 and was widely read, especially compared with missionary-run newspapers, which focused heavily on church news. It remained the most influential newspaper in the country until the mid-1950s (Isoba, 1980). *Uganda Argus*, a newspaper that would later become owned by the government and is now called *New Vision*, was created in 1955 and provided such strong competition that *The Uganda Herald* shut down (Isoba, 1980).

Ugandan newspapers have long faced challenges with staffing and training (Isoba, 1980). No formal journalism training institutions existed in the country, unlike in neighboring Kenya and Tanzania, and the industry saw little foreign investment in local newspapers (Isoba, 1980). Instead, the foreign press, such as the *East African*, based in Kenya, "with good financial backing, better production and news gathering facilities," (p. 232) provided stiff competition to local Ugandan media (Isoba, 1980). Foreign newspapers were banned in Uganda in the early 1970s, with the local government stating that "Ugandans were not yet mature enough to think and decide for themselves" (Isoba, 1980, p. 232).

The 1960s and 1970s brought political instability to Uganda (Ingham, 1994). After contested elections in 1986, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni declared himself president of Uganda and was elected to the presidency in 1996, 2001, and 2006 (Oloka-Onyango, 2004). Museveni remains president today and has made notable social and economic developments during his reign, including a fight against the Lord's Resistance Army. As Museveni remains in power, his relationship with the press becomes increasingly complex.

Fast forward to the 1990s and the broadcast sector experienced widespread liberalization yet still faced challenges related to ownership, regulation and distribution (Chibita, 2009). Today, there are three English-language dailies, including the government-owned *New Vision*, which has Uganda's highest circulation at about 30,000 copies per day. Following closely behind is *The Monitor*, an independent paper with a circulation of about 26,000 (Nassanga, 2007). Other papers, such as *The Red Pepper*, which publishes celebrity gossip and entertainment news, and *Bukedde*, a daily, published in Luganda, both maintain prominent readerships (Nassanga, 2007). Weekly papers such as *The East African*, *The Weekly Observer*, and *Sunrise* also exist alongside state-run radio and more than 150 FM stations. Similar to many other nations, Uganda's media is primarily owned by a few large corporations. Scholars have warned that such

concentration "creates a big barrier to new entrants in the industry . . . and media content is targeted at meeting the interests of advertisers, instead of the 'public interest'" (Nassanga, 2009, pp. 121–122).

Press Freedom

Critical journalism began in Uganda in 1920 with the "first independent African newspaper," *Sekanyolya*, which criticized both the kingdom and the colonial government (Lugalambi & Tabaire, 2010, p. 4). In 1949, political turmoil caused riots, and the regime blamed newspapers. The Press Censorship and Publications Act of 1949 was enacted and limited the circulation of several newspapers, which were later banned. One editor was arrested and convicted for criticizing the king (Lugalambi & Tabaire, 2010). Despite substantial progress, similar struggles persist for journalists today.

The 1995 Constitution guarantees freedom of expression, but some legal and extralegal mechanisms restrict media in Uganda (Kimumwe, 2014; Maractho, 2015; Odongo, 2014). For example, the Press and Journalist Act, which proponents said would increase the level of professionalism in the industry, requires journalists to obtain a certificate to practice journalism from the Minister of Information, something that Anite and Nkuubi (2014) said is "against the national, regional and international protocols on freedom of expression" (p. 29).

Chibita and Fourie (2007) explained that the Ugandan government has a long history of suppressing citizen participation in governance and free expression largely due to "bad colonial and postcolonial policies on the media and language, poverty, low levels of education, and lack of basic access to the means of participation" (p. 2). Regulations are also unevenly distributed among media houses (Odongo, 2014). Many owners of commercial media houses hold substantial financial and political power, thus, government regulators "handle commercial media owners with kid gloves" (Chibita, 2009, p. 303). As a result, some commercial media owners take it upon themselves to self-censor and ensure that their outlets do not offend the government. Additionally, although the Constitution guarantees a free press, it conditions that freedom by stating that the realization of rights and freedoms listed in the Constitution should not "prejudice the fundamental or other human rights and freedoms of others or the public interest" (Yiga, n.d., para. 9), thus, restrictions can arise in the name of public interest.

Despite the array of challenges that journalists in Uganda face, research has shown that Ugandan journalists highly value journalistic norms such as analysis and investigation of official claims and giving everyday citizens a voice (Mwesige, 2004). Freedom House (2017) referred to Uganda as "one of the more vibrant media scenes in east and central Africa" (paras. 5–6), and "Museveni has received international praise for cultivating a 'relatively liberal media climate'" (Tabaire, 2007, p. 204).

A 2013 article in *The Daily Monitor*, a leading independent newspaper in Uganda, said President Museveni has been

the epitome . . . [of] ambivalence, where his predecessors, notably Idi Amin Dada and Milton Obote, were outright hostile in a matter-of-fact manner. Yet make no mistake, the

paranoia over the media has not been any less and several incidents in the last 27 years have clearly underlined this fact. (Bichachi, 2013, para. 2)

Theoretical Frameworks

The ways in which media and development interplay have been the topic of much debate, with little consensus being reached. "The conceptualization of 'media development' is marred by a conflation of means and ends, lack of definition and permeation by narrow normative views," and "can benefit from greater conceptual and analytical clarity" (Berger, 2010, p. 561). One such definition, which remains open for criticism, is McQuail's (1983, 2010) theory of media development, which posits that in times of developmental transition, media freedoms need to take a back seat to the political, economic, social and cultural factors that would enable the country to develop. In particular, "the media are required to join the government in the task of nation building" (McQuail, 1983, p. 188). In the context of Uganda's neighbor, Rwanda, Sobel and McIntyre (2018) suggest that media development theory is at play when journalists self-censor to promote unity and reconciliation during this postgenocide period, but that such a phenomenon can have negative long-term implications for development and democracy building.

Similar to Rwanda, Uganda has struggled with conflict in the past, but the country ended its armed conflict in 1986 and has seen economic growth and poverty reduction since (World Bank, 2018). Despite many positive developments, Uganda still faces challenges related to infant, child, and maternal mortality; clean water and sanitation; gender disparities; and school enrollment (World Bank, 2009), and is considered a developing nation (United Nations, 2014). Thus, this article seeks to show whether McQuail's (1983, 2010) notion of media development can be at play in Uganda today.

Further, in this study we seek to understand whether the safety valve theory applies in Uganda. The safety valve theory is a framework used in political science to discuss political demonstrations and elections under authoritarian regimes (Buehler, 2013; Wiktorowicz, 1999):

Under the safety valve rationale, citizens are free to make statements concerning controversial societal issues to express their displeasure against government and its policies. In assuming this right, citizens will be deterred from undertaking violent means to draw attention to their causes. (Omachonu, n.d., p. 2)

Little research has studied the safety valve in a mass communication context, but preliminary research suggested that blogs in China can act as a safety valve "by allowing enough room for a sufficiently wide range of subjects that people can let off steam about government corruption or incompetence . . . before considering taking their gripes to the streets" (MacKinnon, 2008, p. 33). Essentially, governments can give just enough freedom so that citizens feel as if they are able to air their grievances, but not actually allow for any real arena to make changes, which ultimately preserves the existing system.

Thus, to push press-freedom research in new, interdisciplinary directions and understand how these paradigms apply in Uganda, we pose the following exploratory research questions:

RQ1: How do Ugandan journalists perceive their level of press freedom and/or relationship with the government?

RQ2: In what ways does the press-freedom landscape affect the general public and the country?

RQ3: What is the future of press freedom in Uganda?

Method

This study examined the state of press freedom in Uganda through a series of semistructured, in-depth interviews with journalists in June 2018.

Participants

The sample was constructed with the help of a “fixer”—a local journalist who used his professional network to recruit participants. The researchers worked with the fixer to ensure that the sample included a range of journalists in terms of age, gender, media outlet they worked for, and whether that media outlet was independent or government run. As such, the interviewees included journalists from both local and foreign media outlets who are subject to different levels of interference and/or enjoy different degrees of independence and freedom. The sample of journalists intentionally included media professionals from an array of mediums, backgrounds, and media organizations in an effort to capture various perspectives.

The journalists that were interviewed include editors, reporters, anchors, videographers, and photojournalists who work for the following organizations: *Daily Monitor*, Human Rights Network for Journalists, NBS, *CEO Magazine*, *Eagle Online*, *New Vision*, Urban TV, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Uganda Radio Network, Uganda Hub for Investigative Media, BBC, Chimp Reports, Bukedde TV, NTV, *The East African*, and a publication whose name is withheld at the request of the interviewee. Journalists’ names and job titles are withheld to protect them from potential retribution.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted in English and were held in person in Kampala and Luwero, Uganda. The participants chose the location of the interviews, which often occurred in their workplace or a café. After informed consent was obtained, the researchers asked the journalists questions such as, What is the role of a journalist in Uganda? How do you define press freedom? What is the state of press freedom in Uganda? What factors influence press freedom? How has the level of press freedom changed over the years, if at all?

The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes each, with the shortest being 20 minutes and the longest being one hour and 10 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants’ permission. In total, 27 interviews were conducted, at which point saturation was reached, the point when “additional data do not lead to any new emergent themes” (Given, 2016, p. 135).

Analysis

Audio from the interviews resulted in 350 pages of transcripts that the researchers reviewed in conjunction with their field notes. After identifying several categories of information, the researchers uploaded the transcripts into Dedoose, a Web-based, qualitative data analysis platform. There, the researchers assigned 32 categories of information, or codes—13 of which were used for this study—to the text, which helped further organize the information. Analysis of the transcripts resulted in 515 applications of nine codes and four subcodes in Dedoose.

Findings

Four key themes emerged: (1) The media landscape is neither free nor not free and is, instead, a complex system influenced by both the government and journalists. (2) Journalists face dangers if they report critically about the president or his inner circle. (3) This potential danger results in self-censorship and negatively affects development. (4) The press-freedom landscape in Uganda is getting more restrictive.

Regarding Research Question 1, about how Ugandan journalists perceive their level of press freedom, Theme 1 emerged, which centers on the government and journalists themselves both contributing to the current press-freedom landscape in the country, which is not clearly defined as either free or not free. Such a focus on the contribution of journalists to the troubling press-freedom landscape is a departure from much of the research in this arena. Journalist 17 from the commercial outlet Uganda Radio Network said,

Press freedom ends at a point where you begin to do good journalism, when you begin to report on issues that touch the lives of people, when you begin to investigate on issues of accountability, when you begin to investigate on issues of the military, that's where your press freedom ends. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Many journalists explained that the level of press freedom they have is based on the topic on which they are reporting. Journalist 10 from the government-run newspaper *New Vision* said,

[Press freedom] depends on the nature of the story, the nature of the story, how big the story is. If you're covering, let's say, a government-related piece, you cannot be guaranteed 100% access around these individuals The leaders . . . the ruling party . . . you cannot be guaranteed 100% freedom when you're covering such [people or topics]. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

But the line is not always clear about what information is off limits. Journalist 3 from the private TV station NBS said,

There are times when we've had critical stories. We've run them and nothing has been said. You expect some backlash, nothing happens. . . . But then, [there are] other stories where the state is increasingly involved. . . and saying, "You can't run this story." (Personal communication, June 4, 2018)

Similarly, Journalist 17 from Uganda Radio Network said,

It's very difficult because, for me, I've worked as a reporter and I've worked as editor, and I've worked both in the government publication and the private media houses. And in both the private media houses and the government media houses, there's always that invisible hand . . . [it's an] invisible line, really, and you just never know when you've actually crossed it, you know? It's quite difficult. It's scary at times. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Press Freedom Affected by Government

Unsurprisingly, the previous quotes and many others stem from the notion that the government plays a key role in determining levels of media freedom. Almost every journalist interviewed, from both public and private media houses, mentioned that information about government institutions is difficult to access and dangerous to criticize. "I would say press freedom isn't perfect in Uganda because we have some limitations, for example, access to information. We have a problem with access in some of the information from specific areas, particularly, government institutions" said Journalist 23 from the private newspaper *Daily Monitor* (Personal communication, June 11, 2018). Even more extreme, Journalist 7 from the same newspaper, *Daily Monitor*, said, "If you publish a story that is so critical to the government, they'll sure hunt you down. If you're publishing the story that is promoting and praising them, then you're good for them" (Personal communication, June 5, 2018). Similarly, Journalist 8 from the commercial *CEO Magazine* said,

In Uganda, it's unique that we have a president who has been here for 30 years. So I think his regulation of journalism is more focused . . . journalists are free to write almost everything they want. . . . But if you write anything about the president, his family, and a few other things that will make him angry [then you will be punished]. . . . So I think freedom in Africa is unique and in Uganda, in particular, in that perspective. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Even reporters from government-run outlets acknowledged the heavy-handed role of the government. Journalist 10 from the government-run newspaper *New Vision* said:

You cannot report or talk about certain stories. . . . For most countries in Africa that have heads of states who've been here for long, I don't want to call that—I don't want to use the word "dictatorship," but there are certain stories that cannot be released to public, and that has played a very big role in the press freedom. The government has a hand. I mean, we've seen cases where Uganda police, that should be protecting Ugandans, beating up journalists for covering certain stories. . . . Every year, we have cases of police harassing journalists. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Although the role of the government in the press-freedom landscape is certainly not unique to Uganda, journalists also spoke about their own contribution to the level of media freedom.

Press Freedom Affected by Journalists

Although journalists commonly spoke about the role of the Ugandan government in controlling the media, interviewees were clear that journalists themselves also play a role in dictating levels of press freedom: “There’s a restrictive regime in Uganda, but at times, it comes from us, ourselves” said Journalist 13, from the commercial AFP, an international wire service (Personal Communication, June 7, 2018). Journalist 9 from the commercial outlet *Eagle Online* elaborated:

The threat to freedom of expression—of press, in journalism is the journalists themselves. No one puts a border [on what we can write about], . . . journalists are sometimes the biggest threat to press freedom. . . . The guys who sit and advise policy makers on how to tighten the noose on journalists are journalists. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Journalist 11 from the commercial outlet Urban TV suggested that money contributes to journalists blurring press freedom lines:

Many times, we have PR people in the newsrooms, and they are reporting for their interests in the field because this supplements their salaries well enough. And if we get to be castigated enough, and we need something to fall back to, press freedom sounds like something good. We are being abused, you know? With our press freedom . . . I like the story and everything but this part is not going to run. Why? Because, well, you’ve got to know who pays our bills. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Additionally, Journalist 8 from the private outlet *CEO Magazine* explained that media should have freedom, as long as it is done responsibly:

I believe in freedom. Journalists should be winning the freedom to say the things that they want to say as long as they are factual . . . but these stories that we write . . . they have a lot of credibility [and] . . . people making decisions based on these stories—you can actually keep somebody’s careers, you can keep somebody’s business, you can get somebody in trouble, you can keep somebody’s marriage . . . I believe that freedom, people should be unrestricted, as long as they stick to terms for journalism. But unfortunately, in Uganda, we’ve seen people rushing to go to print. And of course, with the advent of online media, people just go around throwing things out there. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Journalist 24 from the commercial Uganda Radio Network further explained that the government creates restrictive policies in response to errors made by journalists, and thus journalists can take some responsibility:

At the end of the day, the press freedom is attained because of those errors—yes. Because in Africa, what the government would do, is react after you have errors. If there's error, that's when they come up with the law. Yes. So, that's what they do. So we need to minimize . . . errors. (Personal communication, June 11, 2018)

It was also suggested that finances contribute to the role that journalists play in the press-freedom environment. Journalist 4 from the commercial outlet *Daily Monitor* said:

I think for sound, real, serious media freedom, you need to have a critical mass of journalists or enjoy a certain level of job security, enjoy a certain level of financial security. I mean, a good number of journalists here, A-listers that I know, are renting houses in Kampala and they cannot afford to get rent. They cannot afford that their kids are in decent schools. They cannot afford to have a meal in a hotel like this, unless a source is paying for it or a rich family is taking them out. So, it's certainly difficult for them to push back when media freedom is under attack and it becomes difficult for them to resist the temptations that come with poverty. (Personal communication, June 5, 2018)

As a result of the role that journalists describe playing in the press-freedom landscape, data suggest that journalists may be an underresearched aspect of McQuail's (1983, 2010) theory of media development.

Theme 2 arose by highlighting the dangers of reporting critically about the president or his inner circle, which further shines light on Research Question 1. As previously discussed, journalists made it very clear that reporting critically about the president is a dangerous risk. For example, Journalist 3 from the private TV station NBS said, "Essentially, government would come after stories that target the heart, the people at the heart of government, which is the president, his family, and corrupt ministers, which corruption will lead back to him in anyway" (Personal communication, June 4, 2018). Similarly, Journalist 15 from the commercial outlet Uganda Radio Network described the press-freedom landscape in Uganda by saying,

If [journalists are reporting on] an issue that it is involving the ruling regime, then you have no way of fighting, but if it's an issue that is involving a government department, like statutory bodies . . . the government will actually fight for you and try to show that, "You know, it's not right to step on the freedom of the press. You need to give the press the right to be there." But if it's something that is touching on the power, then you have no one to fight for you, and you can't fight it. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Consequences

Most journalists spoke about the possibility of facing severe consequences if they reported on something that angered the authorities. A former journalist who now works at Human Rights Network for Journalists said,

We've had many journalists being charged with the criminal defamation or libel. And majority of those ones have been trying to expose the corrupt government officials, consistently write about them, and how they have misused public funds. Many of such media houses or journalists have been dragged to courts of law. And the state has prosecuted them. So, while you're supposed to play a watchdog role . . . your work is criminalized, not because you're unfactual but because they think that you are crossing the line. (Journalist 2, personal communication, June 4, 2018)

Journalist 4, from the commercial newspaper *Daily Monitor*, added,

It's difficult for [media houses] to allow the journalists to exercise freedom of speech . . . because your broadcasting license might be at stake. It could be revoked at the discretion of the Uganda Communications Commission. It may not be renewed at the discretion of the Uganda Communications Commission—It's an extremely powerful organization. (Personal communication, June 5, 2018)

Journalists from government-run media houses are also not immune to consequences. For example, Journalist 12 from a government-run outlet (the name of the outlet is being withheld at the request of the journalist) said,

I was picked [arrested] recently for a story I did. It was a factual story, but of course the issue [that the authorities were concerned with was] where did I get the information from. And being a government paper, why did we publish to the way we published the story. . . . They picked me from office here, took me and kept me somewhere for one week. . . . You cannot publish a story without getting that kind of intimidation. And then also, the problem also sometimes [is] sourcing information from [government officials] becomes a problem. Once you tend to have asked questions, you want to get documents, they look at you as a threat. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Another journalist, 10, from the government-run *New Vision* talked about the possibility of losing their job if they tried to report critically.

There are some brave ones [journalists] who will push [the boundaries], but most of them, because this is why we earn [a living], yes, so if you don't want to be losing your job because of a certain story. . . . Journalists know about what's taking place in the country, and they're fully aware about it. They will push, some of them, but how long are you going to push, because the state is more powerful than them. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Tegulle (2011) elaborated on this issue, saying, "In order to make ends meet, some journalists naturally find corruption inevitable. A bribe here, an extortion there; a bit of fraud today and a kick-back tomorrow will keep bread on the table" (p. 7). However, it is not just legal and financial consequences, but threats and reports of physical violence and jail time that are common. Journalist 21 from the commercial outlet *Daily Monitor* said,

A lot of things have happened to my colleagues. . . . Someone tells you they have been threatened. [Government officials] send [journalists] text messages. They send them threats on Facebook. They try to intimidate them using the police, using fellow journalists. So, in a way, I think, I try to censor myself. (Personal communication, June 9, 2018)

Journalist 22 from the commercial outlet Chimp Reports explained that this reporter and many others have been physically harmed:

On many occasions, there are news items that the police or government doesn't want media to cover. First example, in the politics, journalists covering opposition politicians, on many occasions, beaten by police because the government thinks by covering opposition, you are giving them mileage. So, the order is, try to stop you by beating you. And many journalists have been beaten, including myself. (Personal communication, June 9, 2018)

Journalist 10 from the government-run *New Vision* said,

There are stories you cannot cover, there are stories that are deemed sensitive. We've seen, over the years, journalists, they, should I say, are thrown in jail, as in journalists, being clobbered, being stopped to cover certain stories or certain events or certain people. (Personal communication, June 6, 2018)

Further, previous research has shown that 80% of media stakeholders surveyed said that media organizations in Uganda did not have policies to protect the health and safety of their workers amidst government threats and harassment (UNESCO, 2018), so the journalists are often left to navigate these challenges on their own.

Some journalists seemed to accept the restrictions and work within their given boundaries, but others spoke about the ways in which they try to maneuver around their limits. Journalist 17 from the commercial outlet Uganda Radio Network explained:

My experience is that you have spies who are in the newsroom as well. You have fellow journalists who've [been] recruited into the government system to spy on you. So, what do I do? If I'm working on a sensitive story, I don't work from the newsroom. I work from home. And when I'm working from home, I don't even save that on my laptop because I know my laptop can be stolen any time and they access the information. I save it on an external drive and then I keep that external drive elsewhere. And I only carry this particular story on a flash drive when I know I'm taking and handing it out to my editor. I used to do that a lot. I still do that. . . . The other thing that I did was I never keep my documents with me, documents that I know that back up my story. I keep it with a trusted either friend or—I never did with relatives as well because you just know they may follow your relatives. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Impact on Society

As a result of the current media landscape, Theme 3 emerged when numerous journalists spoke about the commonplace practice of self-censorship and the harms that the lack of critical reporting brings to society, which answers Research Question 2. Journalist 22 from commercial Chimp Reports said,

[Censorship] has a lot of impact. . . . The public is denied access to—is denied a chance to get information they'd want. And if there is censorship, a chance of changing some things which are not going right [is not possible]. . . . It also has an impact in the development of the country; the country would stagnate, because in case you report about the ills of, for example, corruption, it would change, but if someone intimidates or you self-censor yourself, of course, their corruption will continue, and then the country won't be developed. (Personal communication, June 9, 2018)

Similarly, Journalist 26 from the commercial outlet NTV said,

I think the more the media is censored, the more it affects development negatively, because media brings out the hidden things that are not really going well. . . . The more the society is denied access to information, certain information, the more we stay behind. Information gap is very big in the community. So, the more we are censored, the more those people will stay behind. (Personal communication, June 11, 2018)

Journalist 21 from the commercial *Daily Monitor* elaborated by saying,

You can't develop a country that you're keeping people in ignorance. You're not going to develop a country while people are not enlightened, where people know about stuff. And they will be saying their rights—good governance or bad governance. But when they tell me, "You're keeping people ignorant for the sake of development." I don't understand. That kind of development is that—where people can't criticize the government or a status quo or opposition or anything for the sake of development because when these things don't come out, the anger is going to build within the people, because you'd not let them express what they feel. (Personal communication, June 9, 2018)

Similarly, Journalist 24 from Uganda Radio Network said,

People will abuse us; people will continue to abuse [within] authority because they know the press will not expose them. Secondly, if they abuse [within] authority, it means the resources will be misallocated or they'll be embezzled. And at the end of the day, people don't get resources. . . . They reallocating resources and then, we shall be in poverty, probably, until when there is the change. (Personal communication, June 11, 2018)

Journalist 27 from commercial newspaper *The East African* had similar thoughts:

Any restrictions inhibit society's advancement of progress because you need people to exercise where their minds can take them to be able to explore what they can do—I mean, not to fear that their do's—when the do's and don'ts are front and center of human life, then innovation, experimentation gets restricted. (Personal communication, June 12, 2018)

As a result of the continued crackdowns on free expression, Theme 4 emerged, which shines light on Research Question 3: The press-freedom landscape in Uganda is becoming more oppressive and a change in government is what could reverse that trend. Many journalists spoke about the increasingly growing oppression against journalists, but some interviewees acknowledged that social media may be playing a slight role in increasing the level of press freedom in the country. For example, Journalist 20 from the government-run *New Vision* explained that if police harm a journalist, news/images will be posted and shared on social media immediately, thus, the number of instances of police harming journalists is in decline (Personal communication, June 9, 2018). However, as a whole, most journalists explained that press freedom is worsening.

Press Freedom Is in Decline

Journalist 1 from the *Daily Monitor* suggested that the amount of press freedom given to journalists is “rapidly shrinking” (Personal communication, June 4, 2018), and Journalist 6, also from the *Daily Monitor*, said, “We have a long way to go” in the fight for free expression (Personal communication, June 5, 2018). Journalist 15 from Uganda Radio Network said,

Sometimes you feel like there's some change, like, we've made a step. Journalists are able to speak for themselves. Journalists are able to take action against anyone who tries to infringe on their freedom. And then, after a while, they realize they are back to where they started. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Journalist 3 from NBS TV explained more detail about the declining relationship between the Ugandan government and the press:

[The relationship] was extremely hostile about 10 years ago and a bit of improvement happened when the press freedom act came—the journalists' act. And then, it became extremely hostile again when the walk-to-work protest happened, largely, it's the election in 2006. . . . Since the walk-to-work protest, the state has closely associated the press to opposition. [Journalists] are in the same category as the opposition. So, there's no distinguishing factor that this is independent press that is out to tell a story. (Personal communication, June 4, 2018)

Multiple journalists associated the decline in press freedom with the length of President Museveni's rule. For example, Journalist 17 from the Uganda Radio Network said,

When the current government, the current president Yoweri Museveni, took over our government 31 years ago, he made several promises of press freedom, of access to information. And at the beginning, it was liberal. There was a bit of press freedom. . . . But then, the longer the government stays in power, the worse it gets. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Similarly, Journalist 4 from the *Daily Monitor* said:

I think the [press freedom] space is reducing. It's shrinking. . . . There's no scientific discovery one has to do about that. It's expected. It's a trend that is common with regimes that have overstayed their welcome, whether it's in Africa, whether it's in Vietnam, whether it's in Asia, whether it's in—literally, any corner in the world. . . . [President Museveni has] maintained himself in power for now 32 years, and unless you have a black swan or what, you know, we call "an act of God," you may most likely have him again as president for—his current term will possibly expire in 2021. He has just amended the constitution to remove the age limit. And that means in 2021, again, he will . . . rig himself back into power for another seven years. So, he could easily do 40 years. He's almost unstoppable. . . . Now, what that means is, for you to be able to do that, for a system to achieve that, you achieve that with incredible losses to institutions. (Personal communication, June 5, 2018)

Journalist 1 from the commercial *Daily Monitor* likened the relationship between the Ugandan press and the government to cats and dogs:

Cats and dogs or oppressors and the oppressed. It's very, very—it's hostile. I think the government is very hostile to media and to journalists. And there is—in the early days, the government had the intellectual bandwidth to defend its ideology and kind of argue its predispositions. And now, even many of the idealists have left. . . . So [there is] a lot less patience and a lot less tolerance for critical views. And inevitably, it would happen in a government that has been there for 30 years, 30 plus years. (Personal communication, June 4, 2018)

What Can Be Done to Improve Press Freedom?

Some interviewees like Journalist 17 from Uganda Radio Network suggested that media freedom can be enhanced by the establishment or growth of a powerful journalists association or union—both of which currently exist, but lack cohesion and strength (UNESCO, 2018):

On our part as journalists is that we do not have any journalist association that's worth its name in this country. The Ugandan Journalists Association is quite weak because all the leaders have been bribed by governments. So, we need a very strong journalist association that can stand up to government. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

In fact, research has shown that approximately 85% of journalists do not belong to any trade unions (UNESCO, 2018). Alternatively, responsibility should be placed on media houses, academic institutions, and journalists themselves to increase training and professionalism in the field (Journalist 27, personal communication, June 12, 2018).

However, despite some suggestions about changes that journalists, media houses or educational facilities can make to improve press freedom in Uganda, many journalists primarily pointed to the need for a change in governmental leadership. Journalist 17 from Uganda Radio Network explained:

A lot needs to change [regarding press freedom], really, but all comes from government. We're trying our best to be more professional, because if you look at the caliber of the journalists then and the caliber of the journalist now, there's a lot more training now on the side of the journalist. There's a lot more effort to seek for information, but then, government is also now tightening the rope—every single day, on really coming hard on journalists. So, I don't know if more dialogue between government and the media would help, but that's one way we can do it, if we talk more. We tried it with the police. It has not worked. . . . We are hoping that it's going to change with the new Inspector General of Police, there'll be less abuse of journalists, maybe, we're hoping. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Journalist 27 from the private outlet *The East African* elaborated on the discussion about how press freedom could be improved:

This symbiotic relationship between a free press and the governance of a country and its economic wellness, all contributing one way or the other. If you have—in circumstances where you have governance going in the right direction, a functional democracy, you have more freedoms of the media. And you'll see situations whereby the holders of political power look at media freedom as a donation instead of a right. Where you have an economy that might not be doing very well or controlled by a few people, then you also have an overwhelming influence on how the media operates, because there isn't as much room for the media houses to survive independently from a rather small economy, where you have a lot of options . . . where you have the function of democracy, there is less influence of the politics to kind of direct or restrict how the media operates. (Personal communication, June 12, 2018)

In summation, Journalist 16 from the government-run Buganda Broadcasting Services condensed the sentiments of many journalists by saying,

The bottom line would be to respect democracy . . . when you overstay in power . . . there's a certain point where you reach your climax and start to go down. So, until Africa starts to change, and change power freely and more democratically, the media will have limited freedom. (Personal communication, June 7, 2018)

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to understand the level of press freedom in Uganda from the perspective of journalists, and, in turn, examine whether the theory of media development (McQuail, 1983, 2010) and/or the safety valve theory (Buehler, 2013; Wiktorowicz, 1999) are at play in the country. Journalist 2, a former journalist who now works for the Human Rights Network for Journalists in Uganda, nicely summed up the findings of this study:

They're [the Museveni government] very progressive in terms of progress that the media should be making, because since the media was liberalized here . . . we've had the emergence of so many media houses, but that multiplicity of media outlets has not physically translated into freedom of the media. You have so many media houses, but less of critical content. Yes, because of so much fear that has gripped the practitioners. (Personal communication, June 4, 2018)

In other words, the government is savvy. The media landscape appears liberalized—there are lots of media houses—but if that plethora of media houses does not have the ability to write critically, is the media really liberalized?

These results indicate that, at least to some extent, the apparent paradox of the Ugandan media landscape can be explained by the safety valve theory (Buehler, 2013). It is possible that a safety valve is occurring in Uganda, a semiauthoritarian state, in which the appearance of a liberalized media system, via the high number of media houses, can blur the line between a free press and a restricted press and ultimately reinforce existing power structures. This idea is consistent with Tripp's (2004) argument that rulers of semiauthoritarian regimes, such as President Museveni, only implement the reforms necessary to appear democratic to international donors. "Not far beneath the rhetorical veneer of democratization one finds actions that undermine existing elements of political liberalization, actions that are sacrificed to keep the dominant party or head of state in power at all costs" (Tripp, 2004, p. 7).

Makerere University and UNESCO conducted a study and found that only 48% of respondents from the general public said the following:

The government's blocking or filtering of content on the Internet deemed sensitive or detrimental represented a restriction on press freedom. A smaller number of 18% said it was not, while a sizeable number of 34% were not sure if it was a restriction or not. (UNESCO, 2018, p. 44)

Improved press freedom will require a more sizeable percentage of the population recognizing the impacts of the government blocking or filtering online dissent, suggesting the need for improved media literacy, which may be, in part, the responsibility of the media sector.

Work has presented suggestions about how to improve the press-freedom landscape in Uganda (see, e.g., Jjuuko, 2015; Odongo, 2014; UNESCO, 2018), including areas where the media sector can make

improvements. Media organizations can work to break the safety valve. Media houses should support—ideologically and financially—the Independent Media Council such that it can promote media literacy and develop/implement/strengthen policies at all levels (including at media houses) that protect journalists when they are being harassed.

Unlike in Rwanda (Sobel & McIntyre, 2018), Ugandan journalists mostly do not believe that the government restrictions on the press are helping the nation develop. In fact, many journalists spoke about the harms to development that are occurring as a result of the censorship. Thus, these findings run counter to McQuail's (1983, 2010) theory of media development, which argues that media freedoms may need to be restricted to help a country progress. Given that Uganda is further removed from armed conflict than Rwanda is and has had longer to develop its social and economic infrastructure, it is possible that media development theory no longer applies in Uganda, though it may have done so in the past.

Additionally, results from this study revealed that journalists do not clearly define the media landscape as free or not free; instead, they identify areas—particularly surrounding the president—in which they are not able to write critically. Journalists spoke about the resulting self-censorship and negative impacts on development progress—"democratic backsliding" as Felter (2017, para. 4) referred to it. However, previous research in South Africa and Namibia has shown that "there is no clear consensus about what media freedom and responsibility means in the context of these new African democracies" (Wasserman, 2010, p. 567). Voltmer and Wasserman (2014) suggest that in emerging democracies, journalists navigate processes in which they engage with Western notions of press freedom while simultaneously working through a norming process where "the meaning and professional practices of press freedom are 'domesticated' in many ways through (re-) interpretations that are shaped by specific cultural and historical world-views" (p. 189). Journalists in this study conveyed some inclination toward Western journalistic norms, but also appear to be going through the norming process described by Voltmer and Wasserman (2014), where they have to come up with their own norms and sometimes the process of establishing those norms appears negative. In this case of Uganda, acts such as taking bribes and the lack of a strong professional organization could be negative components of this norming process, but ultimately, journalists are working toward Ugandan definitions of journalism, ethics, and professionalism, and this norming is part of that process. This simultaneously points to a phenomenon occurring in Uganda today as well as suggests that this journalistic domestication may occur in emerging democracies and semiauthoritarian states. Further, this journalistic norming and the role of journalists in Uganda today point to the idea that media development theory (McQuail, 1983, 2010) may not be accounting for the contribution that journalists make to press restrictions.

Conclusion

In sum, findings from this research revealed a murky line between a free press and a restricted press in Uganda, in which the number of media houses has grown, but there are definitive topics on which journalists cannot report critically. Interviews highlighted the worsening of the press-freedom landscape and the negative impacts that such restrictions have on the development of the country. Ultimately, however, findings from this study point to the need to consider journalists in the applicability of the theory of media development (McQuail, 1983, 2010) and suggest that although the safety valve theory (Buehler, 2013;

Wiktorowicz, 1999) may be at play, Uganda is undergoing the process of journalistic domestication that has been seen in other African nations (Voltmer & Wasserman, 2014). This process comes with growing pains, but ultimately, Ugandan journalists are working through a difficult procedure of establishing their own journalistic norms and professional practices.

This study is limited in that it only included the perspectives of journalists, not members of the government or the general public, so only one set of perspectives is conveyed. Although attempts were made to ensure that various journalists were included in terms of age, gender, and media house, the sample included only English-speaking journalists in Kampala and Luwero, which can limit the perspectives that were shared. Future research should replicate this study in more rural parts of the country and in an array of languages. Additionally, other research methods should be used to further contextualize the Ugandan media landscape beyond these interviews, and future research should continue to empirically examine the role of journalists in global media development theories.

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