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Foreword

Do the news media—especially if they are free, plural, and independent of government control—have an impact on the quality of governance? To many, the answer to that question is not only obvious, it is blindingly so. We all know of instances in which the news media have contributed to the improvement of governance in several countries, especially through their ability to expose corrupt deeds and speak truth to power. The problem, however, is that as the governance reform agenda evolves in the field of international development, the role of the news media is still uncertain.

There are many reasons for this uncertainty. First, traditional work in governance often still concentrates on public sector management. A focus on strengthening institutions like the news media is not yet seen as core business in many development agencies. Second, on the question of politics, often officials in donor agencies point out the sensitivity of many governments when it comes to any attempt to make the news media independent of government and better able to hold the government to account. If the issue is raised by donors, some government representatives still readily call it political interference. A minister in an international donor agency once told me that bringing up the topic of strengthening the media is the one thing that is likely to get some leaders of government angry. Third, on the question of competing agendas in international development, many priorities compete for the attention of donors, both public and private. For example, do you buy malaria bed nets or support reform of media regulation? Finally, there is this ever-present challenge: That is, how do we know for sure that the news media are a public good? What kinds of news media are good? Organized in what way?

Opportunities to strengthen the news media will always depend on the situation in each country, and will always depend on the interplay of forces within each country. In other words, the political economic realities will always determine what can be achieved. What that means is that those who want to improve media systems in their own countries must learn to build effective coalitions. That is where work is really needed. Nonetheless, it is possible to do two things. First, it is possible to bring together what we know right now about how the news media can
contribute to good governance outcomes. Second, it is possible to draw the necessary policy implications. These are the two reasons CommGAP embarked upon this project. And we could not have found a better partner to lead the effort than Professor Pippa Norris of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. When we approached her to lead the effort, she was the director of democratic governance at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). She therefore brings to the task not just her outstanding academic record but also a confident mastery of the policy field. We worked with her to organize the workshop that led to this volume.

It is our hope that the book will contribute to a greater awareness of the potential contributions of independent news media to governance reform efforts around the world.

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