

In absence of other democratic institutions, freedom of press can lead to cycles of violence

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While many have argued that media freedom is integral to a functioning democracy and respect for human rights, a new study is the first to examine the effects of media freedom in countries that lack such democratic institutions as fair elections.

"We would expect to find most free media in democratic states and most controlled media in autocratic states, but this is not always the case," said Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, a doctoral candidate in [political science](#) and international relations at USC.

In the September 2009 issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, Whitten-Woodring shows that media freedom in autocratic states does not necessarily result in improved government treatment of citizens. Indeed, media freedom in the absence of other institutional outlets for dissent is actually associated with greater oppression of [human rights](#), Whitten-Woodring found utilizing data from 93 countries for the years 1981-1995.

"The potential for free news media to have a positive effect on government respect for human rights depends on the presence of democratic institutions," Whitten-Woodring said. "Without these characteristics, media freedom appears to have a negative impact on government respect for human rights."

Without democratic outlets for dissent, institutional cycles of protest and repression are likely to evolve, according to Whitten-Woodring, leading to the greater possibility of political imprisonment, murder, disappearance and torture in the short term. For example in Iran in the late 1990s, when President Khatami introduced some press freedom and newspapers began to report on violations of human rights, protests and calls for reform were met with further repression.

"I'm not advocating against free media," Whitten-Woodring said, pointing to instances in Mexico and Uganda where an independent media continued to operate despite state oppression and intimidation. "It is imperative to understand how the effects of independent media vary and are dependent on democratic characteristics . . . that make governments more accountable and vulnerable to public opinion."

She continued: "All in all, these findings suggest that although the free media is able to play a watchdog role over government behavior, this does not always result in improved [government](#) treatment of citizens."

More information: Jenifer Whitten-Woodring, "Watchdog or Lapdog? Media Freedom, Regime Type, and Government Respect for Human Rights." *International Studies Quarterly*: Sept. 2009.

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