Why are More Trade-Open Countries More Likely to Repress the Media?

Abstract

Why are more trade-open countries more likely to repress the media, even though media freedom is positively correlated with general indices of economic globalization? To resolve this surprisingly under-reported empirical puzzle, I argue that economic globalization exerts contradictory pressures on state-media relations. Economic liberalization of trade, foreign direct investment, and foreign portfolio capital should generate incentives for states to repress the media, as states seek to manage the domestic distributive conflicts engendered by liberalization. However, whereas international investors have a stake in the transparency of foreign countries, international traders do not. Thus trade openness should have a uniquely negative effect on media freedom, as investment counterbalances but trade enables the repressive tendency generated by liberalization. To test these expectations, I use a mixed-methods research design combining statistical analysis of all available country-years between 1972 and 2003 and within-case process-tracing on two hard cases: Argentina and Mexico in the 1990s. Trade openness is found to have a large and highly robust negative effect on media freedom: for a trade-closed country moving to the mean trade level in the sample, I expect the probability of media freedom to decrease by as much as .46. Several robustness checks including tests for reverse causality, Bayesian model averaging, and genetic matching all suggest this relationship is not an artifact of omitted variables, outliers, endogeneity, model selection, or the non-random assignment of trade openness. The article has important implications for current research on the globalization-democracy nexus and the comparative politics of media.

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Replication materials

All the data and scripts necessary to reproduce this article are available at https://github.com/jmrphy/globalization_media_freedom.