

The media's role in post-conflict Liberia

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Our study focuses the role of the mass media and their quality in the post-conflict transitional setting of Liberia. It is the first in decades, which includes the perspective of Liberian audiences. Practically all Liberians are carrying pictures of the recent civil war in their mind. After 14 years a peace settlement was signed in 2003, but the situation remains fragile. Hence the conflict driven past continues to be part of the culture, society and politics. What role do the media play in this context as one of various intermediaries constituting the public arena? What expectations do audiences have towards media quality in order to overcome the past and in an overall context of their daily life? (How) do the media meet those expectations?

It was surprising for us to find an extremely high appreciation for media quality indicators such as diversity of sources and viewpoints. Participants of diverse backgrounds – from car washers to university students – autonomously stressed aspects, which coincide with core "Western" patterns of media quality. As we used open focus group discussions the participants did not relate to any pre-formed set of answers. Thus, cross-cultural patterns of media quality could be stated. With this result we affirmed an earlier step of our research: In a classical content analysis we had assessed the quality of Liberian radio news. The stations, which performed best in the content analysis, were among the preferred stations of citizens.

Furthermore we observed that Liberian audiences are extraordinarily conscious and active in the process of gathering and verifying information. The urge for independent and sound information maybe explained by considering the recent history: Liberia had once enjoyed a rather strong and diverse press but the initiators of the civil war gradually oppressed the mass media. Media facilities during the war were not circumstantial victims of fighting but deliberately targeted in order to deny media access to opponents and to deprive citizens from independent and sound information. Nowadays a broad variety of newspapers and radio stations arise in the capital Monrovia.

Thirdly listeners hardly explicitly expect the media to deal with questions concerning the civil war and reconciliation, although they stated that those topics are of major personal concern. In our content analysis we had established that those topics were hardly touched in the news. The sensitivity of the issue can be related to an ongoing process: The peace agreement left open

how to punish war crimes (Hayner: 2007). No definite measures are to be expected before the closing of a current truth and reconciliation commission.

Our report is a joint project between the Liberian Center for Media Studies and Peace Building in Monrovia, Liberia and the Institute of Applied Media Studies in Winterthur, Switzerland. In November 2007 we carried out 16 focus groups with 73 participants in Monrovia. The content analysis included 200 news stories of four Liberian radio stations from the period of February 2007. The overall study enabled us to reflect whether our sample was representative. We addressed methodological questions in order to lay the foundation for a next step where we will analyse exclusively conflict related reporting and include further formats such as talk shows. Generally only a few studies dealt so far with the media's contribution to democratisation in post-conflict and transitional countries.

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