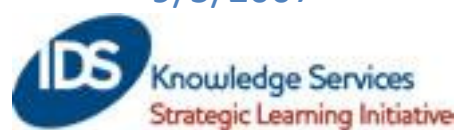# Rebel Voices & Radio Actors: in pursuit of dialogue and debate

A Strategic Learning Initiative Funded Research Paper

Maggie Ibrahim
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Executive Summary

The town of Gulu in northern Uganda stood still as the leader of a then 16 year-old insurgency against the government was heard live through a local government radio station. Joseph Kony, on December 28th, 2002, called into Mega FM's live debate talk show and was heard throughout northern Uganda. The significance of this event can not be underestimated in local and global terms. How has this man, labelled by the ruling government as a terrorist, killer and child abductor, come to be broadcast on a Ugandan government radio station? The answer to this question directly engages and critiques current debates of the role of free media in societies where violent conflict is a reality. Can the media play a needed role in governance and transparency as urged in the United Kingdom's white paper "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor"? Through two case studies of Mega FM radio actors; this paper seeks to understand the restrictions media actors face in their day-to-day work in Acholiland and identify the strategies they undertake to manoeuvre through restrictions.

In the first case Stephen Opio, former Ter Yat - Under a Tree - radio talk show producer/presenter, reflects on his experiences at Mega FM. He was able to facilitate a space for dissenting voices to be heard and bring groups into constructive dialogue. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) chose to make use of the media space which Opio facilitated and on one documented occasion used it to spread propaganda. The government responded and implemented new restrictive laws, such as the anti-terrorist law, which muted LRA voices. Censorship of the media in such a context is understandable. However, restrictions and interference continued during the 2005 elections which muted the opposition leader's perspectives. As a result, the Ter Yat show has come to be seen as uncontroversial and accommodated by the government. Opio's inability to withstand the restrictions and maintain his media space for constructive dialogue and debate resulted in his abandoning the role of Ter Yat producer/presenter with Mega FM.

In contrast, the second case investigates Oyoo Meya's, known as "Rocky", role in producing/presenting the live radio debate show Ter Yat for Mega FM after Opio's departure. His work is contributing to free media by creating an opportunity for the public to be informed of issues which are affecting them and to allow a space where they can participate in a debate around the issues. He does this by choosing key topics to debate, building an informed panel, and moderating the discussion. Rocky has been able to negotiate the pressures of intimidation and the lack of managerial support. He knows when he can push the boundaries and accepts that there are limits. In so doing, he facilitates a space where voices and concerns can be heard. However, through his compromise, the Ter Yat show has come to be seen to accommodate the government and has not exposed politically contentious issues to debate.

Through the two case studies it is difficult to see how media actors in this conflict environment can play a significant role in holding the ruling government to account and promoting peace building when they are facing repressive media laws, intimidation, a lack of information and weak managerial support. Thus the investigation contributes to a reframing of the free media debate by moving away from questions of censorship to investigating what can be done to support the daily struggles of media actors who are constantly negotiating their way through a labyrinth of restrictions.

Recommendations such as a media commission or an international watch dog could be put in place to ensure certain standards and procedures are abided in order to prevent abuse to media freedom. However a more in-depth investigation and pilots of external review mechanisms must be launched in order for the media to play a more effective role in peacebuilding in Acholiland.

Acknowledgements

Free Media vs. Censorship – An Old Debate?

The town of Gulu in northern Uganda stood still as the leader of a then 16 year-old insurgency against the government was heard live through a local government radio station. Joseph Kony, on December 28th, 2002, called into Mega FM's live debate talk show and was heard throughout northern Uganda. The significance of this event can not be underestimated in local and global terms. How has this man, labelled by the ruling government as a terrorist, killer and child abductor, come to be broadcast on a Ugandan government radio station? The answer to this question directly engages and critiques current debates of the role of free media in societies where violent conflict is a reality.

The history of debate between free media and development has been fraught. In the 1980's the New World Information and Communication Order was seen to be putting a muzzle on free press in the interest of government identified development objectives (POLIS 2007, p.3). By the late 1980's, the shift in development thinking was influenced by neo-liberal ideologies that saw the market as a driver for change, not only economic change but social and political. The hollowing out of the state and privatisation of services had an effect on the media. Neo-liberal ideology led to a belief that private media is central to developing a media structure that advances democratic values and development (Price and Krung, 2000, p.7). A reduction of state control over the media was championed by mainstream development institutions. The World Bank, for example, argued that there is a positive correlation between the existence of a liberal media and income growth in developing countries (World Bank, 2002) The ideal of free media, where a market place of ideas and a flow of information can strengthen and promote democracy, is now supported widely by the development industry. According to the summary of the March 2007 POLIS conference report, "Development, Governance and the Media: The role of the media in building African society": "the fact remains, that without media playing a role in society of informing citizens of their rights and of the issues that shape their lives, of providing channels for people to air their perspectives in public debate, and in providing space for such debate, development policy as it is currently structured will very probably fail and democratic debate will perish" (p.3).

The need for informed and engaged citizens around the globe is increasingly a concern of donor countries. As donors cut tied aid in favour for direct budgetary support, the need for citizens of aid recipient countries to have the capacity to hold their governments to account is augmented. The fact that "many developing country governments have become more accountable to donor government than to their own citizens" was a fact that Tony Blair identified must change (Commission for Africa, 2005, p.94). Government accountability to citizens is a key feature of good governance and thus donors are increasingly focused on the role the media can play in this realm. The United Kingdom's Department for International Development's white paper, "Eliminating World Poverty: Making Governance Work for the Poor" calls for the media to play its part in governance and transparency (DFID, 2006).

Government officials, African journalists, media activists, media for development experts, non-government workers, and academics are coming together to move the debate forward on how media can play a role in development and reconstruction. In "Media Policy, Peace and State Reconstruction", Tim Allen and Nicole Stremlau's drive straight to point: "should media freedoms be an essential aspect of peacebuilding, or does peacebuilding necessitate the restriction of dissent – in other words, censorship?" (p.1). The authors question whether this approach to media has been useful and whether or not the debate may need to be reframed.

In order to reorient the debate they set out five arguments which need to be considered, of which three have inspired my research paper to be an investigation into the local realities of radio actors working Gulu, northern Uganda. Firstly, they underscore the fact that approaches to media in transitioning countries is "structured around the experiences and impressions of rich countries rather than local realities" (p.12). Secondly, they argue that journalists and human rights organisations tend to "ignore local realities and rather push their own 'international justice' agenda" which may be counter productive (p.13). Thirdly, they state that

"whatever the rhetoric about promoting freedom of expression, the situation on the ground is often muddled, contradictory and sometimes hypocritical" (p.14).

With such a re-framing by Allen and Stremlau, this research piece aims to add the much needed local reality into the debate. What restrictions do media actors face in their day-to-day work in northern Uganda? What strategies do they undertake to manoeuvre through the restrictions? Through such an investigation, it becomes clear that the question is not whether media censorship is useful in peacebuilding, but what can be done to support the daily struggles of media actors who are constantly negotiating their way through a labyrinth of restrictions. By exploring the work of two radio actors in Gulu, northern Uganda, I will uncover the restrictions they face and strategies they undertake to facilitate spaces for dialogue and debate in their conflict environment. One such facilitated space provided a platform for Joseph Kony to speak live to the people of northern Uganda and will be offered as the first case study. Before turning to the first case study, a brief timeline of the conflict in northern Uganda provides important context.

A Brief Timeline of Violent Conflict in northern Uganda

In constructing a brief timeline of violent conflict in Uganda, it is worthwhile to delve back into pre-colonial times. Dynamics of trading and raiding for ivory to satisfy the European market along with the arrival of Nubian soldiers to secure the region for the Khedive of Egypt (Allen 2006, p25) resulted in the development of violent livelihood strategies. Part of this strategy was the seeking of protection of war leaders, local chiefs, who acted as local agents for invaders. Violence continued through the establishment of a British Protectorate in1900 and local chiefs acted as agents for the new invader, the British government. Their system of indirect rule reified tribes and institutionalised divisions. Ethnic and tribal differences were constructed and a politicised divides exists "between the groups of the north-west, the north, the south-west and the south, as well as between the old kingdoms of Buganda and the rest of the country" (Allen 2006, p.28). Unequal development of the regions and privileged status of the Buganda have undermined Uganda's nation building project. Since Uganda's independence on October 9, 1962 under the leadership of Milton Obote contestation and power struggles have led to violent conflict. From the beginning of Idi Amin's rule in 1971, government control has been gained and secured through the use of violence against opponents (Okello 2002, p.5).

Indeed, since 1986 violent conflict has permeated the landscape of the sub-region of northern Uganda, Acholiland, when the National Resistance Movement/Army (NRM/A) took power by overthrowing a military government led by Tito Okello Lutwa. During this new NRM government led by Yoweri Museveni, violence against civilians led many to turn to armed struggle. The resistance developed into two movements, the first was the Ugandan People's Democratic Army (UPDM/A), and the second was the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM) and the Holy Spirit Mobile Force led by Alice Auma "Lakwena" (Okello 2003, p.5). The UPDM/A reached a settlement with the NRM and disaffected remnants of the UPDA joined the HSM. Together they continued resistance through Alice's kin, Joseph Kony the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).

As a result of resistance to Museveni by the LRA, the region has faced the destruction to social and economic infrastructure. People have been stripped away from their assets and they are confronting devastating vulnerabilities. From LRA abduction, killings, rapes, and abuses from the Uganda Peoples Defence Force to forced displacement. Eighty percent of the population in Acholiland live in IDP camps, "protected villages", where the under-five child mortality rate is a staggering 132 death per 1000 births (WHO, 2006). It is only until recently that peace talks have been held between the LRA and the ruling government. It is amidst this conflict which the media environment has evolved.

An Evolving Media Space in the Midst of Violent Conflict

During Museveni's government rule, the media space has been in a state of flux. In the beginning of his leadership, Museveni continued colonial and post-colonial media laws. It was not until the 1990s that legislative restrictions on the media were relaxed and with the creation

of an independent Media Council, regulatory power transferred. Guarantees for press freedom and freedom of expression were clearly set out the 1995 Ugandan Constitution. Key articles which outline these freedoms include Article 29(1), 41(1) and 43(1). Article 29(1) of the Ugandan Constitution states that: "every person shall have the right to: freedom of speech and expression, which shall include freedom of the press and other media; freedom of thought, conscience and belief…" (UMDF, 2006, p.10). Furthermore Article 41(1) guarantees that citizens have access to information, it states that: "every citizen has a right to access to information in the possession of the State or any other organ or agency of the State except where the release of the information is likely to prejudice the security or sovereignty of the State or interfere with the right to privacy of any other person". Article 43 ensures that these freedoms can be acted upon without fear, "no person shall prejudice the fundamental or other human rights and freedoms of others or the public interest" (UMDF, 2006, p.10). Together these articles provide an important definition of media freedom. However, as these articles adopt elements of the United Nations conventions on freedom of speech and information, it raises questions as to how locally informed was the debate in drawing up the Constitution and establishing the definition of media freedom for Uganda? Such an echoing of the United Nations language seems to point to an importation of the value of media freedom rather then considering the challenges which media freedom may bring to a state undergoing violent conflict. According to Fackson Banda, when considering media there is a strong question of ownership – "are Africans in sufficient control of the media development agenda? What is the place of Africa in the scheme of things?" (Beckett and Kyrke-Smith, 2007, p.17) Such questioning highlights the need for the development of the media in developing countries to consider the local realities in which media is embedded. According to Allen and Stremlau, "laissez-faire policies towards media development in societies that are in the process of resolving violent conflicts are unlikely to be the best option" (Allen and Stremlau, 2005, p.2). Instead, media freedom should not be understood as the absence of media regulation by the government but the right for media actors to articulate their thoughts without fear of repercussion. In fact, there are numerous voices calling for constraint of the media. These constraints should be aimed at restricting information flows from being excessively manipulated and to constrain hate speech (Putzel and van der Zwan, 2005, p.13). Examples of the Rwandan government radio station Mille Collines broadcasting hate speech and playing a significant role in the genocide is an often repeated example of why constraints on the media may be necessary during times of conflict and struggle (Allen and Stremlau 2005, p.2).

Amidst this debate surrounding free media in conflict states, the Ugandan media was liberalised. With the liberalisation saw a mushrooming of live radio talk shows and phone in discussions. The media moved from being "a one-way information dissemination channel to listeners into a two way communication channel where listeners could debate, discuss and air their points of view" (Anderson and Kibenge, 2005, p. 4). Despite this cacophony of voices being heard on the airwaves, Makere law professor Joe Oloka-Onyango asserts that free expression under the ruling government was in a precarious condition. This condition

> "results not simply from the fact that there are numerous laws which remain in statue books that can be called to impinge on the freedoms of the people in the media and in political opposition. What is more problematic is the invisible line beyond which free expression is simply not tolerated. Unfortunately – and this is the basic problem- the exact positioning of that invisible line is arbitrary and unknown. All we can say with the benefit of precedent, is that the invisible line comes into play once the government feel threatened by the grievances being articulated" (Oloka, 1999, p.16)

How do media actors negotiate their way through a media landscape where invisible lines can appear at any moment, and once stepped over, their freedom restricted? What restrictions do they face in their day-to-day work? What strategies do they undertake in contributing to a media environment where dialogue and debate are possible?

Research Goal and Framework – The Media Debate Reframed

In order to answer these questions, I have built on the findings by the Uganda Media Development Foundation (UMDF) 2006 report "The State of Media Freedom in Uganda" as it

offers recent analysis of important issues related to media freedom in Uganda. By taking lead from the UMDF report, this research aims to be grounded in local evidence and follows the assertion by Putzel and van der Zwan that "it is quite clear, yet often ignored, that media systems are in fact a reflection of a particular historical context" (Putzel and van der Zwan, LSE, p.21). The UMDF report examines the state of media freedom in Uganda since the 1995 Constitution. It achieves this objective by exploring the current media laws in place, the official and unofficial affronts on the media since 1995, and investigates the perceptions of practicing journalists, Members of Parliament and the public toward press freedom, media laws and regulation in Uganda.

The research findings highlight that the largest threat to media freedom are political and legal in nature. Findings from an open-ended survey of 137 random sampled journalists in districts from Gulu, Kabale, Kibale, Kampala and Mbale revealed that the most significant limits to their freedom include:
- Government interference and pressure from public officials – for example arresting, jailing and pursuing criminal and defamation cases against journalists.
- Repressive media laws – laws which curtail free expression, such as the 2002 Anti-Terrorism Act (discussed below).
- Lack of access to information – difficulty in finding out various types of information, such as ambitions of the Lord's Resistance Army (discussed below) (UMDF, 2006, p. 36).

This knowledge of the restriction to media freedom in Uganda will act as a framework to my research. I will examine the how two radio actors are dealing with the restriction while facilitating spaces for dialogue and debate. Thus the media freedom debate turns away from the simplistic dichotomy of free media vs. censorship, towards a better appreciation of how restrictions are felt in every day life for media actors and how spaces for debate are created in spite of these restrictions. The importance of 'space' is captured succinctly by John Gaventa who states that spaces are "opportunities, moments and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses and decisions and relationships that affect their lives and interests" (p.26, Gaventa, IDS Bulletin, 2006). Thus each case draws out a different interaction with restriction and demonstrates what spaces have been possible or impossible to create under existing circumstances. In the first case, the space opens up an unprecedented opportunity for the rebel leader, Joseph Kony to speak to the local population of Acholiland. Consequently, the focus lies in understanding the strategies of media actors in their contribution to building an evolving space for media freedom in a violent conflict setting.

Methodology

This research aimed to be an ethnographic pilot study which would reveal issues which would require further examination through a deeper ethnographic study. A more detailed study would provide greater context of the support structures needed to buttress the weight of media restrictions that media actors face in conflict environments. A deeper understanding of the issues would enable greater comparison to other context and contribute to an empirically grounded reframing of the wider debate of media development in conflict states. As Allen and Stremlau assert it is currently premature to propose a new approach to media in peacebuilding environments however underlying assumptions of the liberal approach to media must be questioned. They argue that "there is much research to be had in continuing to sketch out alternative frameworks for thinking about the media's role in transitions. It is our hope that future initiatives will be characterised by a greater focus on holding local strategies to account rather than the continued imposition of rich country strategies" (p.15). The first stage to holding local strategies to account and sketching alternative frameworks is a much more nuanced and ethnographic appreciation of local dilemmas and their context. This paper is a step in this direction.

In conducting social research, I am aware that the knowledge which I produce is inter-subjective and influenced by the methodologies I have chosen and my partialities (Jackson, 1998). I wish to explain the methodologies I adopted and acknowledge my position within this research setting.

Conducting Research in a Violent Conflict Setting

In order to devise a successful research methodology, I needed to understand and come to terms with conducting research in a violent setting. During March 2007, while I was to be conducting field research in northern Uganda, peace talks between the LRA and the Ugandan government were underway. It was a hopeful period within the 20 year cycle of violence and calm.

To facilitate my learning about conducting research in northern Uganda, I sought support from two key actors: Tim Allen, an anthropologist from the London School of Economic and Political Science who has been conducting research in northern Uganda since the 1980s and Stephen Opio, a former radio producer/presenter for Mega FM Radio station in Gulu, northern Uganda. Through the advisement of both Allen and Opio, I was able to gain a better understanding of the current situation in northern Uganda and gain valuable contacts for interviews. I was also able to seek their feedback along the way which has proven invaluable. Drawing on in-country resources for research support allowed me to uncover the various dynamics around producing radio programmes in a conflict setting. Opio is now also featured as one of my two cases, which was more of an afterthought rather than an aim of the research. I believe his reflections of being a radio producer/presenter for Mega FM has offered many insights into this research.

Key Research Dimensions

In order to explore the research question of how media actors create and affect spaces for dialogue and debate in northern Uganda, key dimensions around the issue need to be investigated. These dimensions allow me to uncover the context of media actors, their relationship with the context and their decisions on how and what to communicate when situated within this context.

The four main dimensions chosen include:
- The information communication related to their work. At the micro level, uncovering how radio actors construct their programmes and highlighting the thread of information and communications which is woven throughout their interactions.
- The issue of accountability to the public. A key element of successful use of communications for social change is participation from the "community". Creating a space for dialogue instead of disseminating information has come to be seen as a critical aspect to communications which facilitates processes of change. (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte, 2006)
- Their independence as actors. Literature based on the ideal of media freedom, highlight that an actors level of independence has an impact of what they are able to produce. (UMDF, 2006).
- Their personal background which contextualise them as actors. This dimension has been overlooked in the study of the role of the media for development. A person's education levels or their position on the conflict for example, may have an influence in their contribution to media freedom. By taking a people centered approach, this investigation aims to highlight the personal background as an important element in understanding radio actors' contribution to media freedom in northern Uganda.

A Flexible Research Methodology

In order to uncover these dimensions, I chose three different research methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and river of life drawings. The aim of participant observation was to observe key radio actors in their day-to-day work, highlight my reflections and gain their feedback and insights through a semi-structured interview. Despite arranging this method before hand with the radio station manager through a memorandum of understanding, the concept of shadowing a radio actor for several days was not communicated to the radio actors themselves. It was difficult for me to build the relationship with the radio actors in such a short three week period. However, I was able to apply this method with one radio actor for a day, Innocent Aloyo, and to observe the running of the radio

station as a whole for several days. This change in methodology also meant that I had more time to interview a range of stakeholders and conducted a total of twenty-one interviews in Gulu, Omel Apen Internally Displaced People's Camp, and Kampala. The river of life drawing allowed me to gain an overview of the personal dimension of each actor. Although I did not use it consistently, it was very successful when I did feel that it was an appropriate research method for certain actors. In order to supplement my field research and interviews with a variety of actors on their engagement and perceptions of a public space for dialogue and debate, I turned to evaluation reports on Mega FM to gain a better understanding of opinions and suggestions from the general public on the performance of radio stations in their area and Mega FM in particular.

My Position and Motivation in Relation to the Research

Upon arrival in Gulu, it became clear that my last name, Ibrahim, has a certain connotation for those I interacted with and interviewed. My last name raised questions about my religious faith and I was asked several times whether or not I was Muslim. I would explain that Ibrahim was Arabic for Abraham and that Jews, Muslims and Christians alike shared this forefather and his name. Uganda being a predominantly Christian society and sharing a border with Sudan where violent conflict has been attributed by some to religious tension, I was aware that my name may have connotations which I did not wish to adopt. I would clarify that I was Christian and would feel little resistance and be welcomed. But what if I was not Christian? Would the interaction have been the same?

In addition to my religious background, was the obvious position of coming from outside of Uganda. I did not speak Luo other than the few greetings and key words and only in recent years had I learnt more about Uganda's history. Despite my feverish readings, I only began to have a better understanding of the various dynamics which contribute to people's world view and how they had come to understand the world and violence around them. I decided to wear my newness on my sleeve and approach every interaction by conveying my wanting to learn more about their reality as individuals navigating through this landscape of violence. I also wanted to share their voices and experiences in this research. My analysis and commentary are included in forming the knowledge of how radio actors are manoeuvring through a restrictive media space and contributing to dialogue and debate, however, I hope the reader will agree that the analysis is born out of the rich descriptions by the various actors. Before we meet these actors, a background to the radio landscape in northern Uganda and short history of Mega FM are needed.

Radio Landscape in northern Uganda

Since the liberalisation of radio broadcast media in 1993, Uganda has witnessed a growth in radio stations. In northern Uganda in 2006, a total of 13 radio stations were in operation with 2 new stations being set up in the Pader district. The majority of the 13 radio stations are privately owned, however some are religious and one, Mega FM, is owned by the government. According to a survey conducted by the International Labour Organisation FIT SEMA project (Small Enterprise Media in Africa) in 2006, "the radio stations here do not strongly focus their programming on issues that affect or relate to the local audience. Many play music up to about 70% of the total broadcast time, leaving very little time for informative/development programs" (Opio 2006, p. 1). It is within this context of a relatively new and growing radio landscape which we turn our attention to the birth of Mega FM.

From Radio Freedom to Mega FM – "My" FM

The pioneer of radio broadcasting in northern Uganda, Richard Omona set up Radio Freedom in 1989. His aim was to broadcast mobilisation and sensitisation programmes as well as traditional music in Gulu. Amidst the ongoing violence that has de-stabilised much of northern Uganda this was a great success - a success which was recognised by the ruling government. Minor sponsorship for Radio Freedom began to trickle in after Betty Bigombe, the then Minister of Pacification, was successfully broadcast in Gulu district from Kampala.

Radio Freedom became a means for the army to communicate with the northern population[1]. It was not until 1996 however that ownership of Radio Freedom had shifted from Richard Omona to Radio Uganda, under the Ugandan Government Department of Information. Radio Freedom (also known as Radio Gulu) was used by the army as a means to communicate with the people living in and around the town of Gulu. In 1998 an agreed plan of programming and broadcasting was established with Richard Omona as manager of the station (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.12).

In 1999, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) was approached by the district and local government to support Radio Freedom. Grahm Carrington, DFID Conflict and Humanitarian Advisor, was initially resistant. However, he realised "that radio could play a major role in development" by providing needed information.

As a first step, DFID undertook an evaluation of the radio through Mediae Trust, a media firm based in Kampala. Among its appraisal objectives was to identify and explore "the current and potential role the station might play in the conflict / peace resolution in Acholiland and its wider role as a community broadcaster" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.5).

The report highlighted that the station had a surprisingly weak signal which reached only 40 km and was run by a relatively small and untrained staff. It attributes Radio Freedoms' popularity in Gulu to its programming in the Luo language. Although, music was the largest slot in the station's programme schedule, community announcements were also an important and popular slot. Personal "announcements ranging from births, marriages and deaths to appeals about missing children or livestock were aired" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.16). The station was also used for educational and developmental purposes with regular slots being used by NGOs to publicise their activities.

According to the evaluation report there was an indication that the local government (particularly the District Council Chairman - LC5) kept an "informal eye on the programme content. There is also a certain amount of de facto screening of material; for example, there is a notice attached to the radio station door that states that all messages for the radio from councillors need to be cleared by the Chairman of LC 5 in advance of broadcast" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p. 12). The report continues that "for most listeners, the fact of close Government involvement does not necessarily mean that the radio does not promote peace – respondents and informants attested to the fact that programmes that clarify government policies to the public are key in the promotion of peace" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.23). Thus, the evaluation report identified the challenge to build up Radio Freedom and ensure a "free flow of information which enables listeners to make up their own mind about the parties to the conflict". This free flow of information according to the evaluation "is essential to the resolution of the war and is, in itself, a fundamental human right" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.27).

Key opportunities identified in the report which would contribute to peace building included:
- A complete re-launch of the radio station
- Reliable coverage of existing peace-efforts
- Active encouragement of former rebels to return home
- Improved news reporting
- "Provide reassurance and comfort and restore self-confidence in the traumatised community" (Media Trust, 1999, p.29)
- Enhance debate and promote trust
- Provide practical information and advice for development (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.25-30).

It is worthwhile to underscore how Mediae Trust uphold the value of a "flow of information" so that listeners "make up their own mind about the parties to the conflict". Going so far as to highlight the free flow of information as a human right, demands one to consider Allen and Stremlau's argument highlighted above that counterproductively, journalists and human rights organisations tend to ignore the local realities and push their own 'international justice'

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[1] Radio was the primary means of communication as it was not until 1996 that mobile phones were introduced to northern Uganda.

agenda (p.13). Have Mediae Trust in their evaluation of Radio Freedom (Gulu Radio) considered how a free flow of information which communicates the various dimensions and perspectives of the conflict would be produced? As Allen and Stremlau further highlight the rhetoric of freedom of expression is matched on the ground with a muddled and often hypocritical reality. They demonstrate that in Iraq, US and other occupying troops have been attacked and have felt the need to shut down media outlets. Allen and Stremlau assert that more general concerns such as "hate speech are supplanted in initiatives to create a space for promoting news manipulation, ideally without enforcement procedures or explicit controls. In many respects, this is, of course, how news media in particular is effectively restrained in rich countries such as the UK and US" (p.14). Thus Allen and Stremlau argue that instead, a focus on rebuilding institutions in conflict states would be more beneficial than supporting the rhetoric about promoting freedom of expression.

Despite the ongoing debate surrounding media freedom and more nuanced understandings of the challenges of media freedom in conflict zones being highlighted, with recommendations from the Mediae Trust evaluation in hand, the Ugandan government and DFID agreed to launch a new radio station "to bridge the information and communication gap with a view to enhancing the peace process and spur development" (Mega FM, 2005). To make a mark from the past, a new name was sought for the radio station through a community competition. In 2003, Mega FM, which means "My FM" in Luo, was heard throughout Acholiland (Kitgum, Pader, Lira and Apac districts). According to the Mega FM brochure, it is an "editorially and financially independent community radio station" that is "committed to providing the Luo communities, particularly those in northern Uganda access to relevant, timely and accurate information aimed at increasing opportunities for engagement in peace building and development" (Mega FM, 2005, p.2). From a weak signal of 40 km to being heard across Acholiland, and offering programmes in Luo, Mega FM was in a unique position with little fear of competition. As a result, Mega FM was clearly an attractive option for Joseph Kony to reach the people of Acholiland.

In spite of the improvements and labelling of Mega FM as a "community" radio, this does not obscure the reality that there is strong government interference and that a range of citizens participating in the radio programming is yet to be realised, as will be illuminated below. John D.H. Downing, a communications expert, warns that the term community "consistently raises many more questions and dilemmas than it answers. Using it in relation to radical alternative media demands that its meaning be carefully defined to avoid the production of endless and pointless fog" (Downing 2001, p.39). Neither Mega FM nor DFID have attempted to define their notion of a "community radio station" and show little interest in monitoring and evaluation the participation of various community actors in the production of content for the radio programming.

Furthermore, the appraisal report which DFID commissioned Mediae Trust to undertake at times comes across as being simplistic in their understanding of media freedom in practice and the dynamics which are involved in creating spaces for communication and information sharing. The following statement provides an example of a naïve approach to the issue, "if the radio management is scrupulous in sticking to balanced reporting, and does not allow illegal, racially offensive or 'hate' messages to be broadcast, there is no reason why a whole spectrum of views (including of those of the LRA) could not be aired on the radio" (p.30). The reason why a whole spectrum of views is not heard through Mega FM has to do with very real restrictions which radio actors face in producing programming which will be explored below through the two cases below.

Did DFID take into account the local reality where restriction and influences by the government would inevitably be a feature of media spaces in Uganda at the time? To this Carrington does not come across unaware. *"There were risks attached by any stakeholder to capture the station […] The idea was to be editorially independent"*. The idea, or perhaps more appropriately the *ideal* unfortunately has not been achieved in practice. The ideal of media freedom can be promoted in a simplistic way, but on the ground the reality is much more complex. To this realisation of the complexity of promoting media freedom in a conflict environment, Carrington states that DFID provided *"the staff the skills to manage the different voices and an advisory board to manage* [Mega FM]. *The board at that point did have a*

variety of people on it. The extent to which the board should and does engage is a different piece". This "different piece" as to why the ideal of an editorially independent radio station able to manage a plurality of voices does not occur in practice will be explored through the cases below.

The Cases

Through engagement with two radio actors from Mega FM and a variety of actors from Gulu district and Kampala, I explore the space for media freedom. Key restrictions affect the media actors and their space which they facilitate. Restrictions include: government interference, repressive media laws and limited access to information, as well as management, and capacity of media actors. The two cases highlight the complexity surrounding media in a conflict zone. Furthermore, the cases highlight the different restrictions which the actors face, uncover the strategies they adopt and emphasise what the actor has been able to accomplish within their restricted media environment.

Case 1 – Stephen Opio – Dialogue Stifled and Motivation Crushed

According to the 1999 Mediae Trust appraisal report commissioned by DFID, the radio can play a positive role in promoting open debate around subjects that concern local people" (p.30). A recommendation from the report underscored that the "Acholi community needs a forum in which difference of opinion can be aired. These are not only war/peace issues but other controversial problems in society such as HIV/AIDS, the power of the elders, gender questions, youth unemployment, the influence of Western music/ culture and so on" (Ibid, p.30). How has this ideal of a forum where a plurality of voices and perspectives can be aired played out in practice? How have the restrictions highlighted above (government interference, repressive media laws, lack of access to information, management and capacity) played a role in the production of a live debate talk show in northern Uganda? We turn to Stephen Opio, the former producer/presenter to reflect on his experiences of running Ter Yat (Under the Tree), a live debate radio show.

Personal Background to Stephen Opio

Stephen Opio is well educated with a diploma in journalism. He worked for print media for three days after graduation and quickly realised he preferred working for the radio. He applied to work with Mega FM soon after his graduation. It was a long recruitment process and he was eager to contribute to the station as a producer/presenter of the talk show Ter Yat in 2002. He had undergone several training sessions while working with Mega FM and was acting manager of the station before he left. He is well known in Gulu town and has a range of contacts and friends. He is eager to move back to Gulu with ILO Fit-Sema and continue his career progression.

The Saturday talk show on Mega FM, Ter Yat, has been a space where citizens have been able to listen to a debate and contribute their opinions on certain issues that affect their lives. Providing a forum in which difference of opinion can be aired is what Cornwall would call an 'invited space'. Invited spaces are those "into which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations" (Cornwall 2002). Stephen Opio facilitated this invited live talk show space which became a means for the LRA to listen and share their opinions on the conflict. This role was requested by a significant percentage of people living in Acholiland.

Community Request for Dialogue with the LRA

According to the 1999 Evaluation report commissioned by DFID prior to the launch of Mega FM, 41% of those who responded to questionnaires thought it would be useful if the rebels were invited to participate in discussions and dialogue through the radio. This, as argued in the evaluation report, would "enable them to put across their ideas and programme to the people of Gulu and Kitgum which would in turn allow an unbiased discussion by all stakeholders" (Mediae Trust, 1999, p.25). It is unclear through the report how the close to

majority figure of 41% was obtained. However, despite the uncertainty of accuracy of the survey, the question of whether Joseph Kony should have a platform to express his views of the conflict is an important one. Or should, perhaps information from Kony be censored? In order to promote social cohesion, is it useful for listeners to be exposed to an array of perspectives and contradictory facts?

Sverker Frinstrom, in his ethnography "Living with Bad Surroundings", states that, "despite the gross and counterproductive violence committed by the rebels, or by the Ugandan Army for that matter, I aim to highlight that there is nevertheless an increasing frustration among non-combatants, and especially among my young informants, over the fact that the political issues that the rebels address are left without commentary in the official discourse" (Frinstrom, 2003, p.137). Frinstrom's aim echoes the findings from the DFID evaluation report which states that people want to hear the ideas and programmes of the LRA. However the question remains as to whether the radio as a medium is the most appropriate place for such discussions to take place?

Let us turn to December 28, 2002 - the day which Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, called into the Ter Yat live radio talk show led by Stephen Opio. The discussion which Opio invited guests to debate was why peace agreements have been able to halt rebellions in other parts of Uganda, yet no peace deal has been secured which has put an end to violence in northern Uganda with the Lord's Resistance Army. The invited studio panellists included: Army Spokesperson in northern Uganda, then, Lt. Paddy Ankunda; John Mutto, the Resident District Commissioner – RDC for Gulu (a former rebel leader in eastern Uganda and once met with Joseph Kony as a rebel); the National Resistance Movement (Ruling Government/Party) Chairman in Gulu then Odora Charles Oryem and a Lecturer at Gulu University, James Lagoro. Former Capt. Nokrach of Stockree Brigade later attempted to join in.

A number of actors were able to voice their perspectives and concerns regarding establishment of peace talks. The live talk show space which Opio constructed allowed questions to be raised to the LRA, the army representative and the RDC. It provided an opportunity for the various actors in the conflict to gain a better an understanding of each other's position. It also, however was used as a means to spread propaganda.

Through the live discussion it became clear that Kony and the government had not yet been able to engage in a process towards peace that each party would accept and uphold. Below is a summary of the discussion of which direct quotations are taken from the translated transcript available from the African Unification Front[2].

In the live discussion, Kony highlights that it is the government, not the LRA who are holding back from entering into peaceful dialogue. He states *"In the past, Carter Center took some of you to meet me in Juba. When all arrangements were made, Museveni destroyed the programme. He even confiscated the passports of some delegates, claiming they would defect to me […] Let us be honest in advocating for peace. Let us all get involved in the process together with the government"* (Online: http://www.africanfront.com/page600.php).

To this, Opio questions Kony asking *"How do you advise us to go about it [meaningful dialogue], what do you advise the government to do since you say it was not taking you seriously?"* (Ibid)

Kony replies that *"If the government wants to talk peace the way we are committed to peace, we should follow the process in a transparent manner in the same way it is universally done. We should not be careless in the process"* (ibid).

The government representatives, such as Max Odema and Paddy Ankunda ask Kony to send his delegates to meet with the peace team. Kony reiterates that he is seeking peace talks but

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[2] The full transcript is available from http://www.africanfront.com/page600.php
Translated by John Muto-Ono p' Lajur

believes that the government has ulterior motives. *"You send your peace team to us"* he states. *"But do not send them with ulterior motives. I do not want to see a repeat of the other incident when Archbishop Odama was meeting Otti Vicent and the UPDF prepared an attack as talks were going on […] and another day, you shot Father Carlos during a peace meeting".* The panellists, such as Ankunda and Lagoro try to bring Brigadier Norach into conversation with Kony. However, Kony refuses and asserts that he phoned Mega FM, and not Norach. If he wants to talk to him, they should prepare another day.

Muto, the RDC jumps on the opportunity for further dialogue and states *"I want to thank you for your contributions to this radio talk show which is on air every Saturday between ten and midday. I see it is possible for the LRA to continue contributing to the program for the sake of dialogue"*.

Kony replies *"That is a bright idea which we shall follow, not according to your program, but LRA tactics. I can not promise you that next Saturday we shall be on air with you. You have to wait"* (Ibid).

Through the conversation which took place by means of the Mega FM talk show, it is clear that the radio actors can create a meaningful space for dialogue and peace building by allowing various perspectives on the conflict in Uganda to be discussed. However, when Kony's statements are not responding to the questions and providing a real chance for a dialogue, but instead voicing mostly untrue statements, is it of the benefit of radio listeners to hear such propaganda when they are confronted with violence through this war?

Despite Muto's request above, that the LRA call Mega FM again to continue dialogue, this opportunity was later relinquished by the government. Rocky Oyoo Menya, the current producer/presenter of the talk show, informed me that after three months of the LRA calling into talk shows and other shows on Mega FM to send greetings, the security personnel warned those running Mega FM that there should be no calls from terrorists aired again. The fact that the LRA were able to call into a Ugandan government radio station and aired in Acholiland during times of violent conflict pushes the boundary of media freedom to an astonishing degree. Would the live airing of Sinn Fein have been acceptable on BBC during the war with the Irish Republican Army? No, this would have been illegal in the United Kingdom where the media sector was already well established. So why should we expect an emerging media sector in a conflict state to afford the LRA a platform when democratic countries such as the United Kingdom have not allowed previous 'terrorist' such access? Double standards are apparent when organisations such as the Mediae Trust, as highlighted above, recommend that the LRA have a voice on Mega FM to allow the 'unbiased discussion by all stakeholders'.

In spite of the Mediae Trust's recommendations, the government's warnings to Mega FM staff to put an end to airing the LRA were accompanied by the Anti-Terrorism Act in 2002 which outlaws any form of coverage of an organisation or person that is believed to be a terrorist. Section 11(c) of the Act, "criminalises any actions on the part of journalists to arrange interviews with people or groups declared as terrorists" (UMDF, 2006 p.17). As a result, journalists cannot interview LRA members to get their perspective on various issues surrounding the conflict or they would be liable under the law which is punishable by death. This section of the Anti-Terrorism Act therefore "imposes a complete blackout of news concerning gazetted terrorist organisations beyond official references" (UMDF, 2006 p. 17).

Writing in *The Defender*, David Ouma Balikowa, the then Managing Editor of *The Monitor* writes: "this law can also be used to censor news about rebel activities and deny the public truthful information on how the government's counter-insurgency operations are progressing in the country. This fear is exacerbated by the fact the truth is the first casualty in a situation of war" (Balikowa, D.O. 2003, p.6). Thus the request from some people in Acholiland to have a space on the radio to understand the programme and ambitions of the LRA was restrictive by the government. Only official statements could be broadcasted. The live talk show which Opio facilitated provided a space so that all actors could make informed decisions and opinions about the conflict, yet it was closed off to the LRA. Instead of allowing the LRA to bring their agenda to the public through the talk show, Rocky asserts, that the LRA were

forced to call on private lines and that the "*LRA have not been able to share views publicly through Mega FM*". Facing increasing restrictions and pressures the host of the live talk show, Stephen Opio, felt that he was unable to continue to running the Ter Yat show.

Censorship: A Necessary Restriction?

Does restricting who has the opportunity to voice their ideas and agendas via the radio devalue the concerns of oppositional groups such as the LRA? The government has cut off any chance for media actors to play a role in promoting dialogue among the various groups involved in the conflict. The top two restrictions identified in the UMDF report to media freedom, government interference and repressive laws, restricted Opio's ability to facilitate a space for dialogue and debate through his talk show. He would no longer be able to invite call-ins from the LRA. However, based on the call-in by Joseph Kony highlighted above, Kony did not use the talk show as an opportunity to share his resistance army's agenda but to make propaganda assertions. In such cases it is difficult to argue against the government's stance that such propaganda assertions should not be aired as they do not contribute to dialogue and debate but cloud the issue of conflict in Acholiland through misinformation.

When I asked Stephen Opio about the LRA's political agenda he stated, *"To be honest, you will not hear about it. One of the places you would expect to hear it is on the radio. But even through my years, I don't know what the political agenda is about. Through my years of work with radio, through my interaction with the people who have dealt with them, through the interviews I have done…The political agenda has not come out. I don't think they have a political agenda. I truly don't think they have an agenda. I have interacted with returnees, delegations which have met with them… I still strongly believe they are only now developing a political agenda"*.

This inability to articulate the political agenda of the LRA by an educated journalist born in the north and raised in Kampala is telling. Opio's limited access to and dialogue with the LRA has not allowed him to gain a better understanding of the LRA's actions. Closing media spaces off to the LRA creates certain hegemonic knowledge of the LRA. I am not disputing whether or not the LRA had a political agenda until recently, but I am underscoring how difficult it would be for someone living in Kampala during the majority of the conflict to understand the programme of the LRA. Thus, the limited access to information, as highlighted by the UMDF report, is clearly demonstrated when referring to information regarding the LRA.

This inability to articulate the political agenda is similar to the confusion surrounding the current peace talks. When posed whether Mega FM was offering consistent coverage of the peace process, Stephen Opio clearly articulated his dissatisfaction with management's approach. The failure of management to offer bi-weekly updates on the key issues of the peace talks was, according to Opio simply laxity on their part. Instead of inviting the LC5 and hoping that he will inform the public on the peace process, Opio states "*Not everyone would like to listen to him (LC5). I don't what to listen to him, I want an update on the peace process".*

With such limited information about the LRA, their aims and political dimensions and the current peace process not being made available through the media, how can the average person in Acholiland be expected to understand and navigate through this violent conflict? Frinstrom's ethnography "Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda" should be commended for a rich exploration of "people's uncertainties, intellectual worries, political frustrations and religious queries in a situation of armed conflict and great social unrest …" (p.43). Reading this exploration led to the questioning of how an average person in Acholiland is left to manoeuvre between the dominant discourse of the government, and information passed by word of mouth by LRA supporters. This manoeuvring is happening amongst the killings, deaths, rapes and abductions which surround and affect them.

With these routes to information regarding the conflict, how can those in Acholiland gain needed perspective and information to cope and take a stance on the war which is affecting their daily lives? Instead of the debate being centered on whether censorship is acceptable

perhaps it is more worthwhile seeking answers to who is best placed to constrain the media. An alternative method is needed to allow people in Acholiland to have more access to facts dealing with the conflict and the peace process, then the restrictions imposed by the government. Could calling on the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), an instrument used for self-monitoring by the participant countries in the New Partnership for African Development offer an alternative? Uganda, as a member of the steering committee, would submit itself to a peer review "whose primary purpose is to foster the adoption of certain policies, standards and practices with the intention of achieving political stability and cooperation" (Allen and Stremlau 2005, p,15). Limitations on media freedom would be more acceptable if states had to make a request to implement them. Perhaps if Uganda had taken this route, the Anti-Terrorism Act which criminalises any journalist seeking an interview with the LRA would have been reviewed. It is one thing to censor Joseph Kony from using a government radio station for his propaganda, and another thing to allow a qualified journalist to interview LRA supporters or LRA delegates from the peace talks to provide readers more information about the conflict.

The broadcasting of Joseph Kony on Mega FM and the restrictions which soon followed is an extreme case of how media can open up a space for dialogue and debate and how this space requires monitoring and at times even restriction. How has Stephen Opio been able to facilitate the space when a less controversial figure wishes to speak on Mega FM? Through the example of 2005 Presidential Elections, we see that the interference by the government was just as severe.

Co-opted Space - Mega FM During 2005 Elections

Kizza Besigye, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC) opposition leader, wanted to speak on Mega FM during the election campaign. At the time Stephen Opio was running the talk show and was acting manager. He agreed to have Besigye on Mega FM and scheduled him a slot in the evening. Opio received numerous calls from government security agents saying it was not possible to allow Besigye airtime. He received visits to the station by security agents but persisted in offering a slot for Besigye to speak on air like the other candidates. This warning and intimidation continued all day until Mega FM was surrounded by both plain clothed and regular police. In addition to Opio's strategy to hold firm against intimidation, he sough the advice of the Electoral Commissioner who informed him that Besiyge was not down to address the public at that time and that Opio would be responsible for breaking the rules. As a result, Opio called Besigye to tell him he would not be able to speak on air through Mega FM.

When I asked the management of Mega FM why the FDC party was not allowed representation through Mega FM, he provided me a list of FDC representatives who had appeared on Mega FM during the campaign period. However, the representatives which did appear were unknown names and would not carry as much weight in representing FDC as Besigye who was restricted access to the radio station.

In order to gain a better understanding of the role that radio actors play in creating a space for debate and dialogue, I sought the views of various community members. I asked James Otto, Director of Human Rights Focus in Gulu about various influences that might be having an impact on Mega FM. His view is that there is influence from the political arena "*as to who should be allowed access and who should not be allowed. President candidate was not allowed on Mega, Besigye, both during and after the campaign. We think it was very unethical, very unprofessional, it was very unbalanced. I wouldn't envy the manager of Mega. I would resign myself if I would act in a very unprofessional manner. Because during the campaign we talk about level playing filed. It is not level if you can have President Musevini talk there until he is bored and that you can't even allow someone to step in the compound of Mega, I think it is very unprofessional and undemocratic and unethical*".

As a result, Stephen Opio did resign from his position as acting manager. During his time at Mega FM, he had faced repeated government intimidation and interference and had become disillusioned with the management of the radio station. Mega FM had become a co-opted

space during the elections, a contrast to the aim of a space for information sharing, dialogue and debate.

Graham Carrington, the DFID Conflict and Humanitarian Advisor who was responsible for launching Mega FM shows an understanding of the difficulty of Opio's situation during the elections. *"They* [Opio] *contacted Kampala, then the Elections Commissioner which told them not to do it. It is difficult for staff to be able to stand their ground with the Electoral Commission telling them that they would be accountable. Impossible for DFID to intervene.* [DFID] *Passed comment and concern. It is important to look at the broader national picture than just looking at Mega FM".*

As Carrington highlights, in order to appreciate the actions of a radio actor at Mega FM, it is important to understand the broader context in which the actor is operating. As highlighted above by the UMDF, media actors in Uganda are continuously navigating through difficult waters of restriction. During an election campaign, the restriction to free press had increased. Mega FM was not alone in feeling the weight of government interference. According to Augustin Lacambel, a resident of the Koro IDP camp and frequent contributor to Choice Radio in Gulu, Choice Radio was closed down because it was seen to be a supporter of the opposition and abusive to the President. Bitek Oketch, former bureau chief of the Monitor in Gulu and now freelance journalist had this to say about the closing of Choice Radio during the elections.

"Media Council, simply switch you off if they feel there is a cause. Choice being closed is not fair. There are other ways of correcting. Government, they say that opposition made bitter statements on air and the government wanted a copy of the transcript or audio, Choice did not have it. Closure was on lack of professionalism, why didn't they record the talk show? It took a lot of time for them to be reopened".

It is clear that the government was not only closing spaces for information, dialogue and debate within Mega FM but other radio stations as well during the 2005 election period. The effect of such hidden power was the silencing of the opposition leader, Besigye as well as circumventing what little opportunity people living in IDP camps in the north had to learn about Besigye's agenda of and the FDC party. The result of government interference was to put up "boundaries on participation, and to exclude certain actors or views from entering the arenas for participation in the first place" (Gaventa, 2006, p.29).

The result of limiting Besigye an opportunity to share his views during elections weakened the reputation of the station. The talk show is now run by Oyoo Menya, 'Rocky', and is seen as uncontroversial, where as the entire town of Gulu "stood still" when the LRA were participating in the live talk show. Furthermore, the station lost a key media actor who was willing to test the boundaries and push back against restrictions to free media. In Opio's attempt to maintain a media space which share accurate and needed information, he was left to his own devices. Key representatives and organisations which he should have been able to turn to, such as the National Institute for Journalists, the Electoral Commissioner and his manager, failed to offer support during critical encounters with restrictions. Furthermore, Mega FM advisory board did not later intervene and insist that Besigye have an opportunity to share his political agenda through Mega FM.

According to Grahm Carrington from DFID, the board is meant to intervene in such cases. *"One can develop the processes and then the people have to stand by it and make it work. The board can make a difference…Changes can happen through the board, but also if on programming, then management and the board need to get involved. People need to give feedback to the board in a systematic way with suggestions of how it can be improved".*

Opio's strategy of not giving into pressures from government official could not last without the support from others. Thus, through direct interference and repressive media laws, the media space facilitated by Opio, had been transformed by its co-option by the government. Opposing views to the government, such as views from the LRA and the FDC leaders were not to be aired on Mega FM. This highlights the reality that spaces are never static but are "constantly opening and closing through struggles for legitimacy and resistance, co-optation

and transformation" (Gaventa, 2006, p.27). With this reality on the ground, setting up a media space and hoping for the ideal, that it would be "editorially independent" as DFID advisor Gramh Carrington did is not enough. With managerial support, the advisory board and the electoral commission failing Stephen Opio, another level – a safety net - for Opio should be created to support radio actors to carry out their work effectively. BBC Monitoring is a start to establishing an external monitor which identifies warning signs of violence through content analysis. Would it not be possible to create an international watchdog to ensure certain standards and procedures are abided in order to prevent abuse? Allen and Stremlau have put forth the idea of an Independent Media Commission which adopts a hybrid structure of local and international jurists in order to ensure that the values and interests of one government, or rich states, do not dominate the Commission (p.13). Such ideas bring the free media debate further and could offer future media actors such as Opio an avenue for recourse when confronted with unnecessarily heavy interference by his government. Such an avenue for recourse could also support managers and advisory boards to take action when standards and procedures have been broken.

Case Two : Oyoo Menya "Rocky" – Negotiating Restrictions and Maintaining a Space for Debate

As spaces are constantly changing as a result of interferences and restrictions, it is noteworthy to investigate what has become of the media space, Ter Yat, under the new producer/presenter Rocky. How has he been able to maintain a space where dialogue and debate are encouraged? What strategies has he adopted? What compromises has he accepted?

Personal Background

Rocky is the current producer/presenter for Ter Yat, a live talk show which runs each Saturday from 10:30-noon. Rocky was born in 1975 in Lagile village in Pader district. In 1987, he was displaced by the ongoing insurgency in the North where he went and stayed in Entebbe and completed his primary school. He returned back North to Lira to a complete his secondary education. He was looking forward to undertaking a degree in mass communications at University, however he did not have the funds. Instead he spent a year trading charcoal from upcountry to Kampala in order to pay for the Unyama National Teachers College fees in Gulu. He was qualified in 2000 and taught History and Political Studies. As he was teaching he was also working as a radio presenter with Radio Freedom and later in 2002, Mega FM. In 2003, the school gave him an ultimatum to choose either teaching or radio presentation, but he refused to choose between them. He continues with radio work because *"here I am more exposed than when I am locked in a classroom teaching".*

A Strategy to Build a Media Space for Dialogue and Debate

Dealing with the reality of operating as a media actor in a conflict zone and encountering various types of interference and restrictions a certain strategy is necessary to offer a valued service. According to Rocky, key elements for facilitating a space for dialogue and debate include: choosing the topic for debate; identifying appropriate panellists and effective moderation. In Rocky's experience, these elements are at times influenced and constrained; however, for the benefit of maintaining opportunities where he can facilitate a needed debate, staying the course is worthwhile.

Choosing a Topic to Debate on the Ter Yat Show

In order gain a better appreciation of the information and communication dynamics which surround Rocky's work in constructing a live talk show, I was eager to learn how he chose the topics to be debated and what influenced the topic choice. Rocky explained that "t*here are three ways of arriving at a topic for the talk show".*

Firstly, you need to be aware of what is happening in society. The current strike at the university is given as an example. Secondly, you need to know how it will "*satisfy the*

community…How does it benefit the local community? How it will benefit average person in the village? Thirdly, Rocky consults his colleagues and manager for advice.

In addition to these ways which Rocky chooses topic, there are two additional elements which he added. At times, the local leaders in the community come up with topics and approach him to have a debate on his show; he then verifies and evaluates the relevance of such a topic for his listeners. In addition to gathering topic choices from local leaders, organisations buy up air time to discuss issues relevant for their work. Rocky does not approve of this practice, he would prefer that organisations suggest a topic and if it is relevant to the community he would choose a panel to debate the issue. He estimates that about 20% of his talk show for the year is taken up by organisations that pay for airtime debates.

"To me Mega is getting too commercial so that the management is interested in how much airtime is bought but are no longer concerned about the quality of production…any NGO now come and buy airtime and talk the way they want without the control of the producer. We talked about this in the staff meeting but we see no change. They should choose another slot. The district service for health talked for about 90 minutes and there were no questions to ask. [Management] *are not concerned with programming and production. They are concerned with adverts and funds.*[This is] *Really compromising"*.

In addition to restrictions from the government as seen in Stephen Opio's case above, questions of management can have serious impact on Rocky's ability to facilitate a valuable talk show debate that can offer listeners various perspectives on issues that are affecting them. When investigating how the media can play a role in good governance as highlighted above in the DFID white paper, concerns, perhaps not as contentious as censorship, must also be acknowledged and addressed. Through a people centered analysis, one is able to learn more about the challenges that Rocky is facing in pursuing his goals for an informative and timely radio debate.

Constraints on Topic Choice and His Work

In addition to leaders suggesting topics and organisations paying for airtime, there are key constraints affecting Rocky's choice of topic for live debate.

"At times there are constraints on political topics because at times I am instructed not to hold a discussion on such issues because of its sensitive nature. Sensitive in a sense that it may provoke the people's feeling when something is not ready and that may harm the society. Not good to step on someone's toes. [It is] *Advice but more of an instruction not to do it"*.

If you went ahead, would it be bad for you personally? I asked.

"*Job opportunity wouldn't be good, but would like to maintain a good relationship with them. Self-censorship because of having to strike a balance…When it is a contentious issue you have to exercise self-censorship.*

This happened to me around about three times […] Sometimes I do insist and discuss these issues people think are sensitive and eventually reap good results.

For example, [this occurred when] the "Mayor" of Gulu [Norbert Mao, LC5] fought in the council meeting. The mayor had a standoff with [a] speaker and it became issue of public concern. They advised, from [the] producer, that [this topic would] create more problems than solve. I wanted to discuss it, instead of bringing the mayor, I brought instead other politicians from others levels to discuss it. The mayor called in the night, threatening me. Wait and listen to the talk show.

He called after and said, I think you are professional. I was able to keep him personally aside. Get out more issues of society, a bit broader, not about him specifically.

Rocky's ability to choose a contentious issue and debate it publicly was commended by the mayor (LC5). He is able to do so by not tackling the issue head on but broadening out the topic to be debated. However, he also accepts that he will not pursue topics which are

politically contentious and that might 'provoke' people's feelings in an environment where violence and death is a dominant feature. Accepting that some political topics cannot be debated live on air in order to continue debating other relevant topics which also must be brought into debate seems like an acceptable compromise for Rocky. By keeping issues broad and not tackling them head on, he is able to deal with some sensitive issues and gain trust from his listeners. In addition to choosing the topic for debate, he is also careful in choosing his panellists and moderating the debate.

Choosing the Panel

Rocky points to panellists as a key element in his ability to selectively bring contentious issue to debate on his live talk show.

"We recruit our panellist according to their relevance in the topic of discussion and make sure that the panel is balanced up and no section will complain […] The RDC features often on the panel. If we were to discuss the [university] *strike, then I would bring someone from the university, and then revenue authority, then bring* [someone] *affected by the strike. Also the police managing the protest. I choose people who are related and relevant. RDC is related to political issue, if contentious, I want him to make certain statements. He is chairman of the movement of the district. Chairman of the district for two terms. The LRA talk to him,* [he is the] *president's envoy. He comes once in five or six weeks".*

Rocky offered an example of how his choice of panellists allows him to set an issue to be debated. By bringing in the major stakeholders together as well as the main government representative, the RDC, he is able to host a live debate on air. He expands:

"On my show, the LRA called twice and expressed their views publicly. This did not have any bad repercussion because it also depends on the panel. For these cases a government representative was there in the studio. It was with Mao (LC5), RDC Achoro, and a third person. We were discussing how serious are the LRA to the peace talks.

Vincent Otti (second-in-command of the LRA) called and assured commitments, but warned that politicians should not politicise the talks. Not turn into a money making thing and also they can still walk out of the talks and those who suffer will be the people. Shouldn't be taken that they [LRA] are beaten.

I didn't have repercussions because it depends on who you have on the panel. Who you have brought to discuss the issue. I brought the RDC [which is] president's representative, the military, and the [phone] *link with the LRA.*

I was secure that they would control the discussion between them".

An effective element in maintaining a space for debate is ensuring that the panel consists of those who are "related and relevant" to this issue being discussed. Another crucial element is to ensure that a government representative is a member of the panel so that the government can respond directly to any comments by panellists, or those who call in, such as the LRA on occasion. Thus by inviting relevant government actors into the space for debate, he is able to highlight issues which may have otherwise not been aired. If government actors accept the invitation, then Rocky is protected from taking all of the blame as to why such a topic was debated live. The government representative also becomes accountable and thus offers Rocky a safe strategy to debate sensitive issues. How would Rocky's strategy be strengthened if he was able to turn to an Independent Media Commission when he was encouraged not to pursue a topic or imposed his own self-censorship? Would he be more confident in pursuing contentious issues, such as land grabbing, which has yet to be highlighted on Mega FM? Would it have an impact on Rocky's topic choice if there was an independent commission evaluating the standards and procedures which media organisations were operating?

Moderation of the Discussion

Moderation of the discussion is also an important ingredient in facilitating a live debate. According to Rocky, one must *"moderate for the listener, what they want to hear. At the end of the day, I gather information for the listener".*

When I asked whether he has had to cut people off during a debate, he explained, *"Yes, [it] happens often around the sensitive issues, political issues. Give abuse, direct insults – I cut him off or mould him to talk sense".*

On an occasion a caller attacked the RDC, he insulted and said *"you won't bite the hand that feeds you, you are the type of Acholi that spoiled our tribe".* Rocky asked them to get back on topic. It is not only the callers that Rocky must moderate, but *"the panellist also hurls back insults and [I] have to cut them off also".*

Moderating a live radio debate requires skill sets to ensure that panellists and callers are participating in a constructive manner. According to Joel Okao from Panos East Africa in Kampala and Radio Rhino in Lira capacity of radio actors is important in facilitating a meaningful discussion as well as pushing back against restrictions and opening up a space for debate.

Strong capacity of journalist is essential…We build capacity to generate content of substance and we need to do more. People don't know the parameters, when they know, they can push the limits a bit".

Training for radio actors arms them with the knowledge of how hard they can push back against the restrictions they confront to their media space. Rocky's role in maintaining a space where differing views can be shared around contentious issues is paramount. Not only is he responsible for identifying the topic, but choosing panellists and moderating the discussion in order to ensure that there is a healthy debate. This role of convening and moderation are also key elements of facilitating peace negotiations (Barnes, 2002). Through his facilitating a space where various actors and perspectives can be voiced around issues which are affecting them, dialogue and debate can contribute to peace in northern Uganda. However, as other actors in the community pointed out above, the space for debate which Rocky has maintained is "not too controversial" and has been careful in testing the boundaries of restriction.

Conclusion: Supporting the Strategies of Local Media Actors

With such restrictions effecting radio actors in facilitating live debates on Mega FM, it seems unrealistic to assume that the media can play a role in peace building and democracy without creating the mechanisms to support media actors working on the ground. In the first case study, Opio stood firm against pressures and sought support from others when needed, such as the Electoral Commission during the elections. Disappointingly, however, the support which he required to continue running an effective Ter Yat programme despite the harassment and interference experienced by the government and security agents was non-existent. Where can such a media actor operating in a conflict zone turn to for support? Managers, advisory boards and even Electoral Commissions are all succumbing under intimidations and pressures. An external Commission or Peer Review mechanism discussed above might offer a foundation of support that will encourage media actors to stand firm against intimidation and unwarranted restrictions. A deeper ethnographic study would offer more context to identify why existing support structures as seen in the cases above are failing. A richer examination could lead to articulating new structures to be put in place which could offer the needed support for media actors who are battling against restrictions in conflict environments.

In contrast to Opio, Rocky took a different approach to dealing with restrictions; he constantly negotiates and compromises his topic and panellist selection in order to maintain some media space for debate. As a result, his programme is seen to be playing it safe and accommodating the government but is still able to bring relevant issues up for discussion. This strategy however, does not challenge to a great extent the status quo and isolates actors

from hearing and debating contentious issues which affect their daily lives. According to Greenberg, the role of the press is to organise the "'field of social intelligibility' within which news comes to 'make sense', not by telling people what to think, but telling them what to think about and how to think about it" (Greenberg, 2000, p. 251). This role of telling people what to think about and how to think about it can "perpetuate exclusion and inequality by defining what is normal, acceptable and safe" (Gaventa, 2006, p.29). Thus, laxity, as Opio describes the inconsistent reporting on the peace talks in northern Uganda, could be interpreted instead as Mega FM management failing in their responsibility to 'make sense' of the events shaping life in northern Uganda. Inconsistent reporting, for example, distracts listeners from gaining a coherent picture of the peace talks and closes average citizens off from questioning the procedures. It limits citizen engagement and secures the issue from possibilities of debate. The effect of keeping certain issues from being exposed to debate, and thus influence how people come to understand their place in the world, even their inferiority, is difficult to come to terms with in an environment like Acholiland where the majority of the population have been intermingling with violence and death and on a day to day basis.

As such, it is hard to see how media actors in this conflict environment can play a significant role in holding the ruling government to account and promoting peace building when they are facing repressive media laws, intimidation, a lack of information and weak managerial support. Through this investigation it is clear that the effect of these influences is a live talk show that is shying away from politically contentious issues instead of exposing them to debate. At the personal level for the radio actors, such pressures lead to self-censorship and for some media actors such as Opio, disillusionment. Thus the media debate should be centered less on whether media freedom should be pursued in conflict environments and turn more to understanding how to support the media actors who are facing such pressures. A few suggestions have been made above; however a more in-depth investigation and pilots of external review mechanisms must be launched in order for the media to play a more effective role in Uganda.

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