

The Challenges of Supporting Independent Media in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Paper presented at The Catholic Media Council
(CAMECO) '5th Symposium Forum Media and
Development (FoME) The 'Fourth Estate' in Democracy
Assistance'

Schloss Eichholz, Cologne
Germany 2-3 November 2010

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Background

Since 2001 I have been a consultant adviser to Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) on media-support in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). DFID is currently funding a relatively large media support programme in DRC in partnership with Swedish Sida and the French Foreign Ministry worth approximately 16 million Euros over 5 years. Begun in 2007, just after the DRC's first ever democratic elections, it is called 'Media for Democracy and Accountability Programme' and is already at its mid-term point, ending in 2012. The aim is to support the development of an independent, well-regulated and professional media sector, which gives information and voice to the Congolese people and helps them hold decision makers to account. I helped to design this programme and am currently advising on how to measure its impact among audiences. This talk looks at the successes and challenges of supporting independent media in this vast and fragile state in central Africa.

DRC media context

The Democratic Republic of Congo, has much in common with the rest of Africa when it comes to shortcomings in its media sector. Here we find a media that is disorganized, impoverished, and riddled by institutionalised patronage and corruption. A lamentable lack of trust is present between citizens, the state, and the media. Strikingly low literacy rates exist among the general population according to the World Bank (65.5 percent), and large parts of the country are beyond the reach even of FM radio signals, let alone within reach of newspapers, TV, or the Internet. Media infrastructure (such as power lines, radio antennas, transmitters, and printing presses) has been ruined by years of neglect and war. The majority of journalists have had no formal training, and most media outlets are shoestring operations. Civil society is weak, and, despite 80 percent participation in presidential elections in 2006, civic participation is still in its infancy. Citizens are unaware of their basic rights and freedoms and completely unused to having a say in the running of their country.

And yet, despite this grim background, extraordinary creativity and vibrancy

are also found in the Congolese media sector. Radio is a key source of information for most of the population; the press is relatively free by regional standards (though still far from ideal) and media outlets are many and various—even to the point of chaos. Since the peace deal of 2001 the number of radio stations in the country has boomed to an estimated 450, and TV stations are growing quickly: a survey in 2008 counted 82 TV channels in the country (51 in the capital alone, with an estimated 5 million viewers). The written media is also diverse with at least 228 newspapers appearing on a regular basis nationwide (Frere 2008).

Despite all the difficulties of recent years, the media has kept Congolese music and culture alive through the darkest of times - and, of course, music is one of the Congo's great exports.

The Media-Support Programme - some successes

Built on the basis of thorough baseline research and political analysis, our large inter-agency media-support programme is already at its half-way point, and has already registered some successes.

Our 'Media for Democracy and Accountability Programme' takes a sector-wide approach to media support and is organised under five themes, as follows:

- 1. Training and professionalization of journalists, media managers and others within the media**
- 2. Support for the production of content promoting peace, democracy and good governance**
- 3. Support for regulation and legislation of the media sector**
- 4. Strengthening business management and promoting economic sustainability of media enterprises**
- 5. Support to public service broadcasting - mainly to Radio Okapi, community radios all over the country.**

The lion's share of the funds goes into themes 1, 2 and 5, although 3 and 4 are really the most strategically important themes and focus of the programme. This illustrates one of the challenges of media support in a country like the DRC – it is often not a question of money, but more a matter of investing in long-term core support to key organisations (such as the national regulator, press unions and freedom-of-expression activists) and behind-the-scenes pressure, lobbying and diplomacy, for example in multi-donor forums and direct access to the presidency via ambassadors.

Some successes of the programme include support for the continuing and courageous work of human rights defenders, *Journaliste en Danger*; the country-wide coverage of reliable independent news and debate on Radio Okapi – estimated by the UN to be listened to by a third of the population every day; various popular and pioneering TV and radio series and educational soap-operas on governance, rights, voting and women's issues; many different training schemes for journalists at all levels from community radio technicians to masters degrees for managers of

media houses; and support to the national media regulator - the *Haute Autorité des Médias* (HAM) – especially during elections. There are countless examples of independent radio stations helping to defend rights and services – from exposing cases of mass rape and helping to bring the perpetrators to justice, to helping to restore electrical power to isolated communities; from raising people’s awareness of where and how to vote, to encouraging more girls into school. Many of these radio stations are supported by the Programme – but also by other donors – for instance a big USAID-supported media programme has just been announced in selected provinces.

The Challenge of ‘Coupage’

One of the biggest challenges still facing the Programme and which potentially undermines almost the entire drive towards independent and professional standards, is the widespread practice of ‘coupage’. This is literally the practice of journalists taking their cut (*couper* = 'to cut' in French). 'Coupage' is another name for brown envelope journalism: journalists and editors being paid to cover certain stories or people in a favourable light, and paid to turn up at press conferences and to cover events, in the guise of being given money to cover their “transport,” “dinner,” or “per diems.” This practice is perpetuated by politicians, business interests, and even international donors. For instance, at the launch of the Participatory Poverty Assessment in Kinshasa in 2006 the World Bank was expected to pay the local media to turn up at the press conference.

On the one hand, 'coupage' has its roots in a lack of public purchasing power and investment, and, on the other hand, a willingness by powerful interest groups—for example warlords, Pentecostal churches, diamond barons, and politicians—to buy themselves positive publicity in the press. Even in the capital, Kinshasa, despite its population of approximately 8 million, the market is not sufficiently large to sustain newspapers on their cover price alone. This state of affairs, coupled with low pay and lack of job security, has resulted in corruption among journalists and editors and, of course, bias, sensationalism, and lies. It is a truism to say that as long as the press is not financially independent it cannot be editorially independent—but nowhere is this truer than in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ways forward

Clearly, what is needed to clean up the media sector is to tackle this economic problem at its base, and to help media outlets become viable businesses in their own right, so that they are no longer dependent on—or at the mercy of—vested interests and can pay their staff a living wage.

The fact that financial security eliminates corruption is proven by Radio Okapi, whose journalists never accept 'coupage' and are well-known for unbiased reporting and quality journalism as a result. Radio Okapi is financially independent because it is a United Nations radio station with a neutral editorial line guaranteed by a Swiss NGO

called Fondation Hironnelle, and funded by a group of international donors, of which the biggest is currently the programme being described here. Most Radio Okapi journalists have been able to withstand physical and political threats - although there have been two tragic assassinations of Okapi journalists in the East of the country, over the last few years - and can raise issues that are much more risky for their counterparts in the Congolese media, who have no international protection and who are not paid a respectable wage.

Businesses and investors, such as cell phone, beer and cosmetics companies are keen to sponsor and advertise on the mass media – in fact the advertising sector is growing in the DRC by about 35% per year - but are finding that the sector is too disorganized and too ill equipped to measure its audiences in a reliable manner. With marketing training and support for proper audience surveys this could change the commercial outlook to the advantage of media managers.

Our Programme has been promoting financial self-reliance, through, for example, the Panos Institute and by the *Ecole Supérieure de Journalisme de Lille* in France, by running in-house training courses for media managers. The idea is that business know-how is imparted in the workplace and not—as so often happens—in a foreign environment away from the real-life pressures of the studio or newsroom. The other advantage of in-house training is that it removes the temptation of attending training just for the sake of collecting a per diem—a practice that is regrettably widespread and related to 'coupage'. Management know-how for media managers includes basic courses in accounting, book-keeping, payroll management, human resources, and so on.

Another strategy is to produce content of sufficient quality as to make broadcasters want to pay for it. One small but significant triumph of our media support programme is a TV series we financed which dramatised issues of governance and relations with the authorities and police of ordinary people in Kinshasa, called 'M'pangiami'. This has proved so popular with audiences that it was actually bought by one of the big Congolese commercial TV channels, rather than required to pay for air-time.

Furthermore, our programme is attempting to attract more advertisers to the quality-media by getting better audience-surveys done which give a true picture of audience numbers and profiles. This involves training audience-research companies in statistical research techniques and encouraging media managers to use their data to attract advertisers.

Despite these strategies, making media outlets financially secure so that journalists can be paid decently and be less tempted to take 'coupage' is a long-term challenge. No doubt it will mean that market forces will squeeze out many of the hundreds of media outfits that have proliferated recently. Meanwhile, there is a strong justification – I believe – for international donors not to leave everything to the market but to subsidise the best quality media through programmes such as the one I have described here, to ensure that they continue to fulfil the function of fourth estate, and promote democracy and accountability.

Frere, M.-S. (2008). Le Paysage Mediatique Congolais. Paris, France Cooperation Internationale.