

Prevention is better than cure

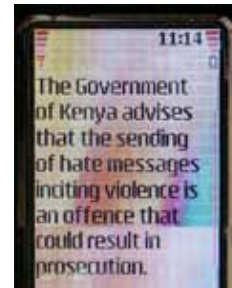
a proposal to stop the resurgence of hate media.

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What is the problem?

Hate media, and specifically electronic media that incite people to kill others, is making its return.

The military in certain failed or fragile states are gaining a better understanding of hate media can be used for localised psychological warfare, specifically to incite ethnic hatred.



Introduction - Lots of dialogue, not enough action

Over the last two years, there have been several discussions and international conferences about the role of media in pre and post conflict situations. These have included conferences at [Deutsche Welle](#) in Bonn (April 2007), the Worldbank - FAO [WCCD](#) conference in October 2006, as well as a series of excellent workshops organised in London by the [Crisis States Research Centre](#) during 2006. Reading the reports and talking to participants, there seems to be a remarkable consistency in the conclusions, which are summarised below. The problem is that there seems to be little follow-up in terms of action. The exception has been the recent policy briefing [study](#) on the Kenya 2007 elections in April 2008 by the BBC World Service Trust. But they also highlight that a lot more needs to be done, especially in improving the haphazard system of monitoring hate media.

There is a slow realization in both donor and recipient countries that terms such as “*prevention of conflict*” or “*post-conflict*” are often meaningless. They are useless because they assume that there will be a day when conflict goes away and lasting peace breaks out. Conflict is part of human nature. In many areas with deep-rooted mistrust going back generations; a short-term intervention is

not going to work overnight, not even within a couple of years. You cannot prevent a conflict. But you **can** prevent a conflict from escalating into violence.

Participants at these recent media conferences have drawn on the experience of Rwanda, Uganda, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Indonesia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Balkans, Sri Lanka, Nepal, East Timor and Zimbabwe.

Lessons Learned From Recent Media Discussions

The lessons learned from the discussions are summarised in the following observations.

1. ***Oversimplification spells failure.*** There are still too many projects in fragile states where the people trying to help do not really know what the conflict is about. Yet, this is crucial to the success of the intervention. There is a tendency for (especially Western) agencies to oversimplify a situation, in an attempt to reduce it to a conflict between parties A and B. Perhaps this has to do with the way projects are “sold” to funding organisations? In all real-world conflicts, there are always more than 2 parties involved. Those agencies that fail to understand the complex relationships between the local parties sometimes find that their *post-conflict* work is simply used to prepare one or more parties for the next conflict situation.¹
2. ***Template Driven Assistance Not Effective.*** Peace media initiatives are having mixed success, especially because the areas in which they are operating are fragile, chaotic and progress is poorly monitored. Some large Media NGO’s have the tendency to take solutions from a template developed for one country and try to apply them in the new situation. Overall, there has yet to be a better consensus on what should comprise best practice in peace-building media policy. Some believe creating that supporting independent private media should be done to the exclusion of the existing state broadcasters. A strong media council is then needed to regulate private initiatives. Others point to the fact that state-run

¹ It is often forgotten that some of those involved in Radio Tele Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM), probably the most notorious outlet of hate media were given skills training by western agencies. They were unaware of the plans by some individuals in the Hutu dominated government to circumvent the ban imposed on harmful radio propaganda to which the Rwandan government had committed itself in the 1993 peace talks, along with rapid liberalisation of the media.

broadcasters are usually the only institution with national coverage and that help should be given for them to become public service or public-private institutions. In fact a complementary strand of strategies and tactical interventions is certainly required to properly address local or regional situations. In fact, a toolbox of ideas is the best approach, if the right tools are selected for that particular job.

3. ***Local Intervention Always Distorts the Market.*** Most NGO's and international media organisations realize that it is essential to involve the local media, whether national, regional, local or community. But foreign NGO's need to realize that once they get close to the local media, they become part of the conflict or crisis situation and all that it involves. Their intervention will always affect the market in some way. The challenge is to come up with strategies that give mid- to long-term benefit for a community.²
4. ***Career Prospects Unclear.*** There is also a trend for NGO's and broadcasters to organise short-term thematic seminars for journalists (e.g. on health reporting or building a radio-station brand) but unless the participants can apply the skills in the institutions they work for, the effect is only short-term. Often, these courses are not part of a wider training scheme. Unless journalists can build a career in this type of media, they will be vulnerable to bribery or simply leave the business. One of the reasons for this is that very few journalists are paid enough to resist the temptation to bias their stories. Therefore, many of them resort to a corrupt practice known as 'coupage'. This involves accepting meals, drinks, money, or gifts from those politicians or interest groups who want their stories covered positively. In more extreme cases journalists are physically threatened unless they cover a particular event, or unless they agree to tell downright lies about someone's opponents.

² International donors have on several occasions funded the communication strategies of opposition movements in an effort to ensure that varied perspectives were made available to the population. The external interventions are based on the premise that a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices will promote peace, understanding and liberal democracy. At times, political concerns and beliefs of external (Western) actors take priority over the realities that are present on the ground. When supporting opposition movements or enforcing media freedom occurs without an understanding of the existing complexities, development agencies need to be aware that they can do more harm than good.

5. ***Dangers of Cheaper Technology.*** Technology is enabling those who seek to do evil, as well as those who do good. Hate media is not longer fixed to one place. Laptops have replaced tape recorders, AM broadcasting is being superseded by networks of compact FM transmitters, which are harder to monitor from abroad. This technology is smaller, lighter, and roughly one-tenth of the cost of 10 years ago. When Rwandan Patriotic Front troops drove the government forces out of Kigali in July 1994, the hate radio station, RTLM used mobile FM transmitters to broadcast disinformation from inside the French-controlled zone on the border between Rwanda and Zaire. This caused millions of Hutus to flee toward refugee camps where they could be regrouped and recruited as future fighters. Incidental reports from aid workers and reporters in Congo and Northern Uganda indicate this kind of tactic has not gone away. It is simply not being reported or monitored.

6. ***Alternative “Broadcast” Mass Media are emerging.*** While there has been substantial research on the role of hate speech in igniting violence, a more nuanced approach to the media of destabilisation is required, particularly with respect to the role of new technology. Simple methods to “broadcast” hate SMS messages over a mobile network have also emerged. In 2007, the Kenya National Commission for Human Rights (KNCHR) denounced the hate text messages well ahead of the December 27 elections. Yet in the unrest that ensued in early 2008, there was evidence that SMS was used.

The news agency AFP got hold of a number of these messages from mobile phone users, some of which contained the following: “if your neighbour is ykuyu, throw him out of his house. No one will hold you responsible”. UN humanitarian information agency, IRIN news also reported another one: “The blood of innocent Kykuyus will cease to flow! We will massacre them right here in the capital. In the name of justice put down the names of all the Luos et (...) Kaleos you know from work, your property, anywhere in Nairobi, not forgetting where and how their children go to school. We will give you a number on where to text these messages”.

Fortunately, although there was still no government in power, the civil authorities used the same channel as the hunted perpetrators. “The government of Kenya advises that the sending of hate messages inciting violence is an offence that could result in prosecution”, explains a text message sent to all Kenyans after the elections. Sadly, since 80% of the

phones used in Kenya are prepaid, and the networks have no way of sorting out good SMS's from bad, tracking the perpetrators has proved almost impossible.

7. ***Sustainability May Be Mission Impossible*** The word sustainability is fashionable but in fact it does have a meaning. There are too many three-year projects put into developing countries, with the expectation that during the lifetime of the project, the advertising market will grow large enough to support a radio or TV station. Whilst this may work for a music station, it is different if the mandate requires the making of news and current affairs programmes or investigative reports.³ There needs to be more moral courage to understand that yes, sustainability is important but sometimes there are situations where media support is so urgent that action needs to be taken, even if sustainability is in question.
8. ***Thinking broader than broadcasting.*** Sustainability has far-reaching implications for capacity building and development. You cannot just train people to be journalists. You also need to train people to be managers and to be regulators. Station managers need help in developing business models that are crafted to fit their own local situation. Great programmes are not made (for long) at radio stations with a poor station management.
9. ***Security and Safety.*** It makes no sense at all to train journalists if they then get killed because of what they write or say. Too often courses are organised in countries where there is little or no prospect for the journalists to put their knowledge into practice in the short-term. Courses have been cancelled because the journalists discovered

³ There are no examples of where this works in Europe without some form of subsidy. Language groups are not large enough to support this type of journalism that, if it is focused and well done, is also expensive. A comparison of the budgets of public service broadcasters in Western Europe with their state-public counterparts in Africa or Asia reveals a vast gap in the level of funding. Many state broadcasters are on the verge of breakdown, because they have not been able to adapt to situation when they are no longer a monopoly. The solution is to cherry pick some aspects of both models above – but also to look sideways to emerging funding sources such as the mobile telecoms industry – hungry for content to distinguish themselves from competitors.

there was no job at the end of the training. or that it was so poorly paid that the benefits of the training were small to zero.

10. ***Anticipating Change.*** Support organizations are often poor at anticipating change and what that will mean when dictatorships fall. In cases like Bosnia or Afghanistan money flooded into an area when the situation changed, but the capacity to reconstruct was slow to get off the ground. The market is suddenly crowded with competing organizations all with their own agendas and no interest in coordinating activities. There must be a better way.⁴
11. ***Prevention Projects In Fragile States.*** It is very important to make donors aware of how important it is to fund projects in the states where disputes have not yet reached conflict proportions. It is tragic that everyone only seems to get excited when people after people start killing each other.
12. ***Long-term perspectives*** are often sorely lacking and yet they are essential. This includes clear, open exit strategies for NGO's and rules of engagement. Some station managers in Afghanistan are now complaining that the organisation that came into a region to help them have now become their competitors – and are poaching the local staff they trained. That's because the international organisation concerned also has broadcasts in Pashto to Afghanistan. During the time that these broadcasts are on the air, they are actually in competition with the partners for listeners' attention.

⁴ Take the case of Rwanda in 1994. Initially, the hate station RTLM was not taken seriously by western governments and diplomats. Although RTLM clearly qualified as harmful and attacked even members of the diplomatic corps in Kigali, there was no decision to take forceful measures to silence it. The western donors limited themselves to making representations to President Habyarimana who responded by promising to look into it, but did not taking any action. Both the French and the American ambassadors opposed any action against RTLM. The US Ambassador at the time claimed that it was the best radio for information and that its euphemisms were subject to many interpretations. As the then Canadian ambassador, Lucie Edwards, later said: "The question of Radio Mille Collines propaganda is a difficult one. There were so many genuinely silly things being said on the station, so many obvious lies, that it was hard to take it seriously... Nevertheless, everyone listened to it - I was told by Tutsis (sic) - in a spirit of morbid fascination and because it had the best music selection."

Next Steps – Setting up an independent media monitoring and research system

The authors of this proposal see the urgent need for the establishment of an international, independent media monitoring and research centre. This centre would have a strict mandate – to act as an early warning system for instances of incitement to genocide. **This is NOT an attempt to create yet another bureaucracy. Instead, the centre would aim to have more of a clearinghouse function, maintaining a “helicopter view” of the situation and being transparent in its operations at all times.** There is no reason that the centre could not be housed as part of an existing institute or foundation (see point 2 below).

The clearinghouse has four main tasks:

1. **to develop an alert system that warns the international community about countries or regions where the international laws against the use of media for the incitement of genocide are being broken.** The system would make all its findings public – presenting it to media (such as prominent newspapers and international networks) as well as to the International Criminal Court in the Hague.. Such a clearinghouse would support the evolution of domestic and international laws that protect information flows and constrain hate speech; implementation would need to be overseen by a neutral organisation, such as a regional grouping (like the OSCE) or an existing UN agency such as UNDP to ensure against abuse or manipulation
2. **to be a clearinghouse for information on media projects taking place in areas at risk for hate media.** Part of the reason that there is duplication of effort in the field is the lack of an overview of who is doing what and where. It is unlikely that NGOs, broadcasters, and government will *coordinate* their activities in the short term. But, if there is open access to information on what is already planned, there is a chance of synergy and possible cooperation between different organisations. We are aware of a proposal in May 2008 by Netherlands based organisation Press Now, together CAMECO, Colombia University and Zurich University of Applied Sciences called MediaMe. We support such an initiative to find common ground between organizations.

3. **to design better tools to analyse the local media landscape in (developing) countries, contributing to a better understanding of the role that media is playing and the forces are that drive it.** This means undertaking a diagnostic analysis of the complex political, economic and social background of the country, as well as of the nature of conflict, and the structures of government and citizens' participation before and after a war, or period of violent conflict. Often it is presumed precisely what information people in conflict crisis areas need. But most of the time we do not know. Audience impact studies and reviews are needed.

4. **to compile a reference list of studies made on news programmes, including Western Europe/North America, to see how ethnic groups are portrayed and whether there is systematic racial/religious stereotyping.** Some (public service) broadcasters have to monitor this as part of their licence and report back to their Board of Governors on trends that might be a threat to "diverse opinion" or exclude sections of society. We believe there are academic institutions also doing this on a more regular basis and some international news agencies also review the way they report the news. This problem of stereotyping has become an issue repeatedly raised at several recent conferences, notably the AIBD Asian Media Summit 2008 in Kuala Lumpur and the 2008 DW Global Media Forum in Bonn. In many Muslim countries, particularly in Asia, the general public perceives many of the Western media as contributing heavily to the negative image of Muslims. Speakers, including Nobel peace prizewinner Shirin Ebadi, noted that the constant association of Islam with violence, through labels such as "Islamic bombing" and "Muslim terrorist" serves to amplify these stereotypes.

Deliverables

At the very least such as organisation would highlight circumstances that require closer investigation. This makes it a little more difficult for strategically/economically “unimportant” parts of the world to be simply ignored.

The centre would publish its findings but strictly separate facts from any commentary on those facts. The results will be made available to anyone who needs them, but actively sent to organisations such as the International Criminal Court in The Hague, broadcasters dealing with international affairs, or UNDP.

Points from this paper were part of a presentation by Jan Hoek, Director General Radio Netherlands, given on June 2nd 2008 in Bonn.