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THE MASS MEDIA AND VIOLENT CONFLICTS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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Abstract: Mass media have been a critical weapon of warfare since the cold war, and even more recently, the powerful intrusion of the new media: transformed the landscape in terms of reach and influence. Its role can be both constructive and deconstructive. The Rwanda genocide, armed violence in Nigeria and Kenya, and Balkan wars has questioned its roles, powers and ethical responsibilities in violent conflict circumstances. In these cases the mass media played a poisonous role. Although establishing a causal relationship between mass media and framing of opinion, emotion and beliefs that steams violent conflicts in Sub-Saharan Africa is neither linear nor clear. However, this paper underscores mass media's compelling influence on how perception in fragile armed conflict environment of Africa is developed. It is not only used as an effective propaganda machine for promoting regime defense, building resistant movement, but also transforming the political actor's parochial interest into people's interest.

Keywords: mass media; violent conflicts; content framing; hate speech

INTRODUCTION

Mass media plays sensitive role in perception and actual accounts of conflicts and wars. On one hand, the expectation is nothing short of a watchdog, to help the public filter facts from fiction, preserve the conscience of the people, and provide the information that people need in order to make rational decision among choices.

On the other hand, the media is also sensitive and help galvanize public opinion and convey same to other sections of the society (Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2008). The role of mass media in disseminating information as a matter of knowledge in human awareness can actually be both constructive for peace as well as deconstructive. The constructive aspect of mass media is grounded on the formation of reality during peace process in conflict resolution. On the other hand, the deconstructive phenomenon of mass media can be sieved by the news content causing an inevitability or probability of violence reaction among the conflicting actors (Imtihani 2014). Mass media plays key role in violence conflict situation; which may take two different and opposing forms. Either the media stay out of the conflict and are independent, hence become a critical tool for the resolution of conflict and management of violence: or it takes an active part and has responsibility for increased violence. The role of media in a given conflict, and in the stages before and after, largely depends on a complex set of variables: including relationship between the media and actors in the conflict and independence the media has to the power holders in society. Fundamentally, a strong and independent media contributes to, not just the management of violent conflicts, but retention or creation of peace and stability in conflict affected areas (Puddephatt 2006).

THE MEDIA AND CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS

One of the defining features of contemporary global phenomenon is violent conflicts. In the last decade, just using children as one indicator; more than two million of them have died in conflicts, over one million have been orphaned and more than six million have been seriously injured or disabled (Puddephatt 2006). A troubling dimension is the rise in the number of intra-state violent conflicts which have fundamentally compromised the welfare abilities of nation-states over its citizens; especially in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA).

In its analyses of 59 major armed conflicts that occur since the end of Cold War, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) described majority as intra-state. Owing to these prolonged conflicts, many states have effectively collapsed or rendered very fragile: not the least; induced grave human suffering, undermined rule of law, destroyed existing abysmal public services and infrastructures, displaced populations, exacerbate poverty, and consequently become burden on the international community. The Rwanda genocide and Balkans wars (leading to the break-up of Yugoslavia) have questioned roles, powers and responsibilities of the media in violent conflict circumstances. In both conflicts, the media played a poisonous role: by directly organizing and inciting genocide in the case of some Rwandan media (e.g. Radio Mille Collines (RTLM)), while some former Yugoslavia media acted as vehicle for venomous nationalism and division: more so that, the battle for hearts and minds is as all-important as the battle for territory and all warring actors aspires to control its own

media narratives. Equally, the Nazis, Fascist and the Soviet Union manipulated the media to create a hegemonic climate conducive for unchallenged exercise of power (Puddephatt 2006, 5). In the case of international media, political significance of certain conflicts sways the response of powerful states and in turns influences media's coverage of such conflict. Similarly, the extent to which the media allocate coverage preference for one conflict rather than the other shapes the awareness and early responses. The underlining factor appears to be that, the media groups pays close attention to the concerns of their domestic audience (e.g. the most powerful international media - North America and Europe), who need a point of identification (e.g. women and children suffering, religion, use of chemical weapons, etc.) in the conflict for their attention to be engaged and for coverage of such conflict to be sustained. Therefore, reportage of conflicts, if it is not within the interest of their domestic audience, the likelihood of awareness, let alone intervention is very slim. For example, a recent CNN report (Elbagir, Razek, Platt and Jones 2017), where black Africans are being auction in Libya, in 21st century would have continued, if not for the outrage from the domestic audience of the big media groups.

THE STATE OF MASS MEDIA IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Sub-Saharan Africa is the new epicenter of change in terms of global digital divide and transformation of media use. Since the millennium, it has transformed from being largely unconnected to the internet, to having millions of people using it. Although, because media have been relatively undeveloped for several reasons, principally due to education, income and lack of access to energy (electricity); the effect of the digital changes have been more dramatic in SSA than in countries where traditional media have been much better established (Balancing Act 2014). However, the increasing amount of media available and access to the internet have created key changes leading to two kinds of Sub-Saharan Africans in terms of media and communications; "the haves" and "the have-nots": representing those living in rural Africa are at a disadvantage to their urban counterparts.

The vast majority of population in rural areas has far less access to modern media, because of the geographic distances and lack of infrastructure. Until recently, access to the Internet was an almost entirely an urban phenomenon, although a small number of rural people now have access. But, even in more developed countries by SSA standard; like South Africa, Nigeria, have only 24% and 34.8% (Statista 2015) respectively of Internet users in rural areas (where majority of the population is concentrated). Due to this shortages, government traditional media (accused of tilting narratives in conflict situation), still remains the main source for consumption of information by the rural population; hence, monopolization of media and information. In the latter half of last century (characterized by civil conflicts and where media was an instrument of warfare

in SSA), over 70% of all the mass media in Africa are state-owned; i.e. almost all radio and broadcast stations are owned by government (Wilcox 1974, 37). In Zimbabwe, as most of the SSA countries, the state-run media are direct instrument of the ruling ZANU-PF/Mugabe dynasties, constantly attacking and blackmailing the opposition as stooges of the British government and invoking racial sentiment against them.

However, in the changing socio-economic climate facilitated by more access to internet democratization in SSA, the state monopoly of mass media or information management is now a little bit curtailed. Sundry privately-owned competing newspapers and other publications now exists compare to when only one or two newspapers owned by the government or the ruling party before now. Similarly, the same also for TV and radio stations, many of them privately-owned commercial broadcaster, compare to periods where there used to be only one sycophantic state-owned radio and TV station. There is no empirical evidence yet to show if this trend had contributed to lowering violence civil conflict in the hemisphere. However, in the last two decades, there is a reversal in the magnitude of violent conflicts by half of its peak in 1993 (where 40% of SSA countries are in active wars) (Marshall 2006, 6). A remarkable trend one may say!

Radio is still the dominant mass-medium in Africa with the widest geographical reach and the highest audiences compared with TV, newspapers and other information and communication technologies.

Overall, radio is enjoying a renaissance and numbers of small local stations have proliferated over the last two decades, owing to democratization, market liberalization and also, it is the most affordable communication technology for rural Africans. Besides the negative exploitation of radio in the past for violent purposes, radio seems to have proven itself as a developmental tool, particularly with the surge of community and local radios, which have facilitated a far more participatory and horizontal type of communication than was possible with the older, centralized broadcasting models (Mary Myers 2008). According to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), 93% of Tanzanians, 92% of Kenyans and 90% of Mozambicans own radios, vastly outnumbering people with access to internet, mobile phones and television. In both rural and urban areas, radio ownership outstrips televisions, computers and telephone ownership.

Over the past two decades, while radio use diminishes in the western societies, it's on rise in Africa. According to UNESCO, community radio use in 17 Sub-Saharan African countries grew by more than 1,386% in a six-year period between 80% and 90% of households have access to a working radio set.
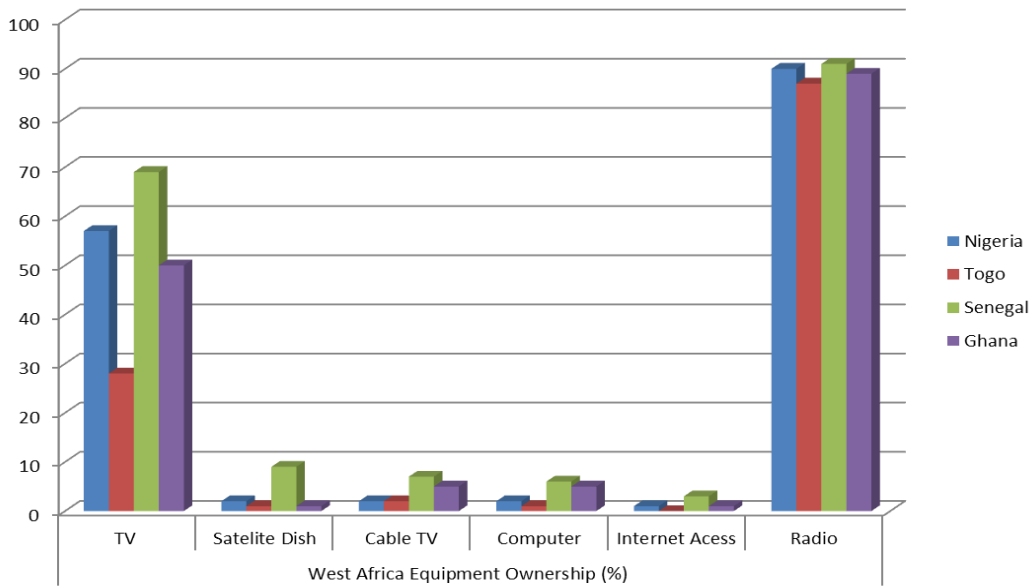
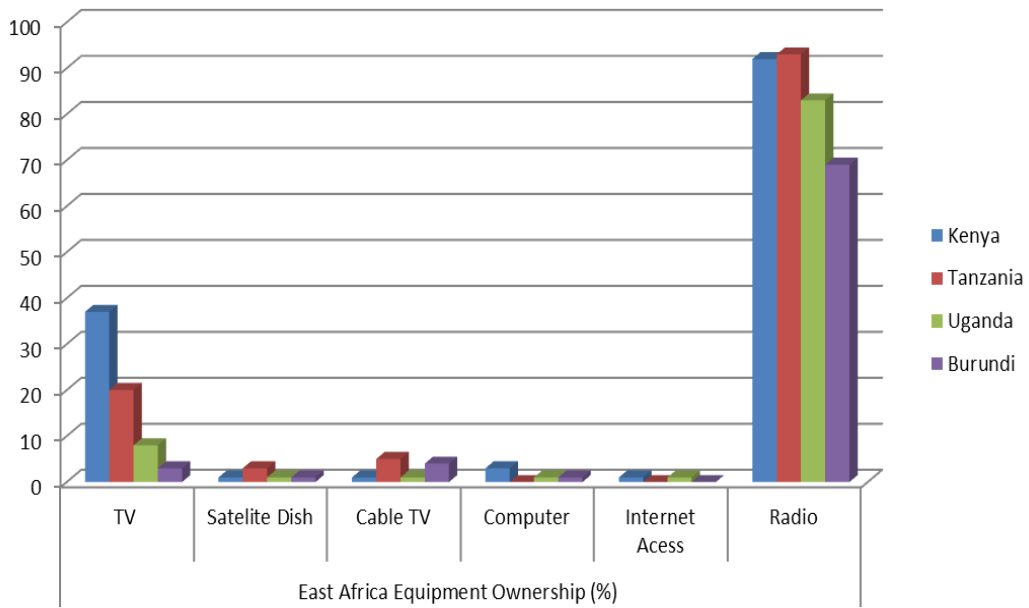Figure 1: West Africa Media Coverage (Balancing Act 2008)

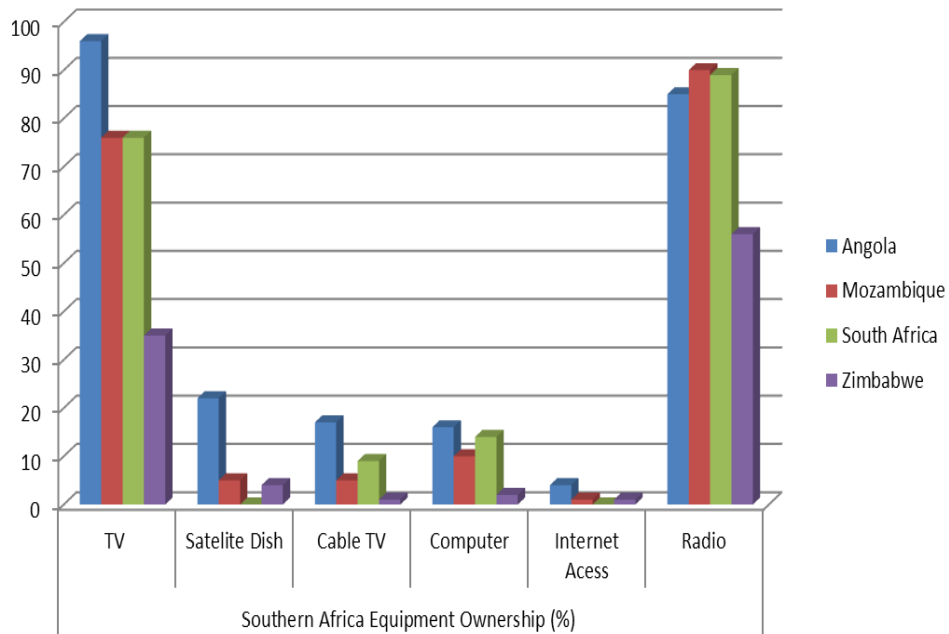Figure 2: East Africa Media Coverage (Balancing Act 2008)

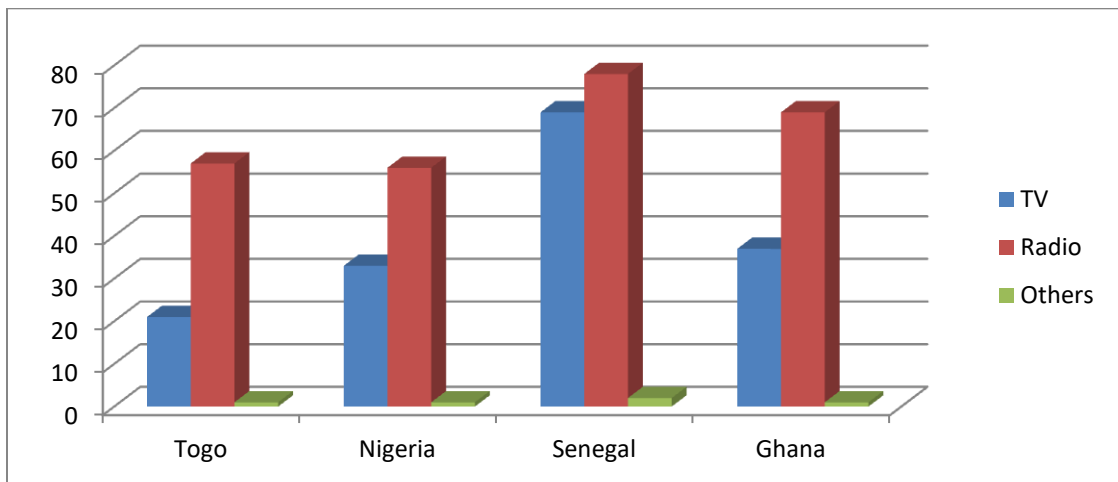Figure 3: Southern Africa Media Coverage (Balancing Act 2008)

Figure 4: Daily Media Use in Some Sub-Saharan Africa Countries (Balancing Act 2008)

THE MASS MEDIA AS CONFLICT FACILITATOR IN SUB – SAHARAN AFRICA

Although establishing a causal relationship between radio listening, television viewing and other media on one hand and the framing of opinion, attitudes, emotion and beliefs that result most times to violent conflicts in SSA on another hand is neither linear nor clear. The predominant assumption is that mass media exerts compelling influence not only in the realm of politics, culture and economics, but also on how population develop image about phenomenon; especially in armed conflict environments. The media "provides not only information, but also conceptual frameworks within which information and opinions are ordered" (Lichtenberg 1990, 9).

In other words, mass media (especially radio and TV in SSA) had been used as weapon in the hands of warring actors or partisan states in violent conflicts, to spread favorable views, hate campaigns or mobilize society for or against others, a political agenda, their values and/or ideologies. Similarly, just like how the Western mass media (BBC, CNN, DW, etc.) influences global consciousness, so that the World Economic Order that favors the West seems natural (Musau 1999; Bourgault 1995).

The mass media in conflict environment becomes effective propaganda machine not only for promoting defense of an actor's argument, building resistant movement or army of people to challenge opposing arguments/views, but transform the actor's interest into people's interest. State actors in SSA are famous for this practice: from South Africa (apartheid), Zimbabwe (Land/white farmers), Nigeria (Biafra agitation/civil war), Rwanda (genocide), Cameroun (French/English regions dichotomy), etc. According to Joseph Goebbels: "Propaganda works best when those who are being manipulated are confident, they are acting on their own free will (Mcintyre 2018, 114). The most impactful of mass media in this respect in SSA has been the radio.

The Case of Rwanda Genocide

Between April and July 1994, over 800.000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were killed. 250.000 women became victims of sexual violence, many of whom were killed afterwards. An estimated 70% of the women who survived were infected with HIV. At the end of the 100 days of slaughter, 85% of Tutsis – totaling 10% of Rwanda's population – were killed (Amnesty International 2004). Extensive hate propaganda campaigns of the Rwandan media, exaggerating perceived historical differences between Tutsi and Hutu and spreading fears, that Hutus could once more be the victim of suppression if Tutsis were to take over control in Rwanda. The propaganda was "wholly swallowed" by Hutu peasants, who began to identify not as Rwandan, but Hutus (Guest 2004). The media such as the newspaper (Kangura), Radio Rwanda and Radio Mille Collines (RTLM), became tools of mass propaganda; portraying extreme ethnic hatred and labeling Tutsis as "the enemy".

Unfortunately, there was lack of alternative media sources. The media, especially the radio (controlled by the Hutu government) poisoned contents of information in order to create mass movement and transform ordinary people into militias. Neighbors turned against each other, friends against each other, even relatives against relatives. It is estimated that 130,000 people took actively part in the killings (Burnet 2008). The obvious question is: how such a high number of seemingly ordinary people became ruthless mass murderers and commit crimes which shock the human conscience? The attempt to answer could still be traced to Nazi Goebbels's propaganda instrument: lies when repeated well-enough creates an illusion of truth (Stafford 2016). The Radio as used in Rwanda reveals the power of mass media in creating the perception of "us" versus "them". While the seed for protracted social conflict leading to the eventual genocide was sown by several factors, however, the Rwandan Hutu-controlled media was well aware of how to use it to its advantage (Lower and Hauschildt 2014).

What made it most successful was the legitimization of Tutsi dehumanization (referred as cockroaches) and call for their extermination; similar to Nazis portrayal of the Jews. The Hutu media played pivotal role in spurring on the genocide as it occurred. RTLM in particular became an active organizer and mobilize of violence against Tutsis and moderate Hutus. McNulty (1999) described RTLM role as the "facilitator of genocide"; so much so that, Killers carries transistor radio in one hand and the other - a machete (Power 2001).

Kenya 2007 Post Election Violence

Mobile phones were used to create disinformation and hate speech following the 2007 general elections in Kenya. False information circulated outside the mainstream media, created a cycle of ethnic violence that engulfed almost half of the country. Before official announcement of results, messages claiming that incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was using the Electoral body to rig the elections started circulating. Considering the intensity of ethnic-based politics in Kenya, coupled with an online disinformation about falsification of results to favor an ethnic group over another, the eventual results announcement further triggered widespread and systematic violence, resulting in more than 1,000 deaths and displacement of over 500,000 civilians: according to ICRtoP.

The media was used to circulate false voting process and results, in which Kenyans believed, but changed upon release of official results. This created doubt over the political system and in turns suspicion by ethnic groups. The outcome was the 2007 post-election violence.

Biafra in Nigeria

The recent agitation by Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), mainly the Igbo ethnic group, for secession from Nigeria and using Radio Biafra as vehicle for promoting hate speech in a fragile and ethnical sensitive country like Nigeria is another example of mass media being used as violent conflict facilitator. Nnamdi Kanu, the Director of Radio Biafra and leader of IPOB use the medium of Radio Biafra to inflame ethnic division and disparage the Nigerian state; calling it a "Zoo" and openly clamoring for arms donation and armed rebellion by the Igbos against other ethnic groups. According to Mr. Kanu through its radio broadcast:

> The only language that people in the Zoo understand is the language of violence and force […] our promise is very simple. If they fail to give us Biafra, Somalia will look like a paradise compared to what will happen to that Zoo. It's a promise, it's a pledge and it's a threat […] if they do not give us Biafra, there will be nothing living in that very zoo they call Nigeria (Nagarajan 2015).

The Radio Biafra and other social media platforms had helped the group mobilize demonstrations mainly across the south East of Nigeria: Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Delta, Cross River and Ebonyi States; some ending in fatality. One of its protests in Onitsha Anambra State, marking Biafra Day lead to 30 death and many injured. IPOB claimed over 1,000 of its members have been killed (Okoli, Nwaiwu and Ugbor, 2016).

While Radio Biafra would have taken similar dimension of RTLM in Rwanda, however, Nigeria's ethnic composition is not binary as was in the later. Also, unlike Hutus, the Igbos are not 85% of the Nigeria's population. But, similar agitation in the late 1960s resulted in death of over two million Igbos, many of whom are women and children. Therefore, using dehumanizing languages such as the "Zoo" or "Cockroaches" (as was in Rwanda) shows similar pattern of using mass medium of immense reach and power to frame messages, appeal to emotions for solidarity and eventual call to violence. In Rwanda, hate speech against Tutsi added to decades of ethnic tensions between Hutu and Tutsi, creating the conditions that enabled the genocide. An important note, this analysis is not about the Biafra secession agitation itself, but the use of mass media (Radio Biafra) as instrument for facilitating violent conflicts.

Framing Argument

Framing is the selection of some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more conspicuous in a communicating pattern, so as to exaggerate a particular problem and influence causal interpretation (Entman 1993). News frames that are culturally sensitive are most influential on societies and the public opinion, because they

employ words and images highly prominent in the culture, to maximize noticeability, understanding and draw intense emotion (Entman 2004). Empirical research has demonstrated that the political environment can spur different news framing of similar events (Dimitrova and Strömbäck 2008). For example, news coverage or debates in the United States about women reproductive rights, on CNN and FOX News television channels. This subject is framed differently to their audiences based on their ideological appeal (liberal versus conservative).

The same is also obtainable in violence conflict environments, where elites are promoting values of significant political interest to them: hence, the framing of news presentation constitutes the very actions that create meaning to events.

The media constitute the most important source of information about politics and conflicts for most people in SSA, giving it a considerable amount of influence over people's perceptions, opinions and behavior. That is why all parties in armed conflicts: state officials, armed rebels and other warring sides' targets exploitation of the media to foster their goals by adapting their activities to the logic of media operation (Vladisavljević 2015). During the US/NATO inversion of Libya in 2011, it was framed as 'humanitarian aid' to prevent massacre in Bengazi by Muammar Gaddafi in the mainstream US media, whereas it was framed as a 'military intervention' by Russia, China and other African countries.

As it pertains to SSA, the Rwandan conflict of 1994 is the best reference of how media framing (domestic) facilitated extreme violence. The RTLM supplied listeners, mostly peasants in rural areas, with information that promotes fear, hate and calls to dehumanize members of the minority group; thereby legitimizing violence and facilitating mobilization for genocide (Steeves 1998; Melvern 2004), including the framing of President Habyarimana's assassination as the handiwork of the Tutsis. Also, Robert Mugabe, for years, framed every opposition to his political dynasty as anti-black empowerment, anti-land redistribution agents, or pro-white; who want to return the country to the white minority influence. Media as violent conflict facilitator largely depends on its framing and agenda setting.

MEDIA AS TOOL FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND STATE-BUILDING

The growing acknowledgement of immense role the media play in helping to fuel conflict has turned scholars towards examining how it can equally play a constructive role in conflict resolution, peace-building and state-building in Sub – Saharan Africa. The need for unfettered access to unbiased information is critical for Africa's development. Disinformation can at any stage of a conflict, make people desperate, restless and easy to manipulate (Kuusik 2010). According to President Harry Truman "You can never get all the facts from just one newspaper, and unless you have all the facts, you cannot make proper judgments about what is going on" (Colgan 2009).

For the media, it is difficult to find a balance between preventing harm caused by information and protecting individual expression. However, finding the balance is important, especially in conflict situations. Mass media and journalism must help to distribute information that counter hate-speech and foster environments of balanced opinions (Koven 2004). Responsible journalism must be truthful, balanced and carry fair account of events; without judgmental representations and embellishment of reality. The media possess ability to defuse tensions before reaching breaking points and keep a critical observation on government, opposition and society. Supply of credible information enhances reach and conflict management, and also advance democratic principles.

In most armed conflicts, parties often make overtures to draw majority of the people on "their" side, which in many occasions induces misrepresentation of facts and an attempt to seize control over the distribution of information. Therefore, the intervention of unbiased and free media is important not only for societies, but people directly affected by violent conflicts: prompting peace-promoting citizen media, media regulation to prevent incitement of violence and conflict-sensitive and peace journalism. There is no consensus on the best approach to reporting conflict in the media industry. Recent plights have sought to explore the distinction between peace journalism and conflict sensitive journalism through analyzing specific interventions on conflict reporting. The suggestion is that, appropriate approach might entail examining the professional responsibilities of media reportage in a conflict area, including:

- avoid portraying conflicts as a zero-sum game, but rather disaggregating the various interests that clash.
- It also would involve seeking to humanise both parties – making it clear that sometimes there are no simple villains and victims.
- try to look behind the positions that combatants take and identify their interests, which may create more common ground than is apparent.
- Some media organisations have argued that the very practice of good professional journalism is itself a capable conflict resolution tool.
- Strategic communication: E.g. whilst Burundi's Hutu President was also assassinated just like Rwanda, but the Burundi media worked with the UN and domestic officials to broadcast a message of calm, averting atrocities on this occasion (ICG 2001, 67; Lewis 1994; BBC News 1994).

Whether local or international, the media will constantly face considerable challenge in trying to cover conflicts; especially in SSA. Besides the inevitability of commercial or political pressure to focus on sensational or ideological, most violent or dramatic incidents, at the expense of fuelling issues that may underpin the conflict, media can be responsive by managing information that will rather de-escalated tension.

However, in order to explain conflicts in holistic manner to those affected and the external observers, the media must be able to operate freely devoid of threats and with the capacity to report on all aspects of the conflicts. Knowing the truth about a conflict is also an important way to get justice; and media can help achieve that.

Finally, the media ethics and weaponization of mass media for political, cultural or ideological gains must be visited often; especially among inexperienced local journalists, in environments recovering from long years of media suppression. Media and journalists can help to transform violent conflicts into the normal processes of peaceful politics; by reporting accurately the activities and opinions of people from different sides to a conflict. Media is a good medium for breaking down misleading and dangerous stereotypes. Local media, especially in SSA, due to the volatility of violence should develop an ethical code of practice; on how violent conflicts be covered.

KEY CHALLENGES TO THE MEDIA IN CONFLICTS ARENA

The greatest challenge for the media in armed violent conflict environments is the enormous danger inherent therein. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ) estimated that 1,071 journalists covering conflicts have been killed over a two and half decades (1992 – 2014) period; most of whom are not accidentally in crossfire (Tumber 2014). Majority are killed based on what they had written. CPJ data since 1992 - 2019 indicates only 23% (300) of journalists died in crossfire/combat, while 77% (1034) are murdered; often in reprisal for their reportage (CPJ n.d.).

CONCLUSION

The mass media can be of immense assistance in conflict management and state-building. However, they are equally constrained, because, the media cannot eliminate armed conflicts altogether. The media is undoubtedly a good tool for managing conflict and diversity in SSA, but more is required than ethical and responsible reporting to ensure sustainable peace and development. Regardless of the negative role media has played in violent conflicts in SSA, the potential of the media in managing conflict and post-conflict situations remains a net positive.

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