

Beyond Broadcasting

The role of community radio in conflict transformation and peace building processes

Summary MSc dissertation, by Nynke Douma (November 2002)

This thesis raises the question how community radio can be employed sustainably for conflict transformation and peace building processes. The study is based on extensive literature study and six months of fieldwork in Uganda and Sudan with Radio Voice of Hope (RVH), which broadcasts for Southern Sudanese people and aims at increasing their capability of resolving the Sudan conflict. The broader environment in which media operate, such as other radios, educational institutions for journalism and NGOs dealing with media and peace building, were incorporated as well.

With the aim to avoid abstract notions on journalism and ‘the’ media, chapters one to three deploy an actor-oriented perspective on media and development. Focusing on everyday practices of journalists, neutrality, sustainability, localities, interface, and the life worlds of listeners makes it possible to regard media as being constituted by a diverse set of conscious social actors that shape and transform the world they report about.

When looking at theory of contemporary conflict, peace and the media; community media is put forward as a crucial factor to start peace building from a grassroots level. Nevertheless, media practice is beset by constraints on political, social and economic levels, which cast doubts on the possibilities to use media for conflict prevention. During conflict, standardized notions often attributed to media practice (like neutrality, objectivity and impartiality) do not hold. Further, and influenced by (post)colonialism, (‘new’)media became state-owned propaganda tools that impose their views on to the public. As part of democratisation processes in Africa, media became privatised in the 1990s. Instead of securing a more balanced and accountable flow of information, it had rather diversified effects, ranging from low quality of coverage and over-commercialization (Uganda) to continuous centralized ownership by the state (Sudan), all incapable to reach the rural majority.

In order to provide insights on the ‘reality’ and practice of RVH journalists and its target groups, chapter four deals with the decisions and objectives that structure the programs. It also provides a case study on how a journalist goes about collecting material in a refugee settlement, followed by an analysis of several programs. Chapter five focuses on what radio programs mean and contribute to the lives of listeners in terms of amusement and knowledge on a range of subjects. To make sure that programs do fit the daily reality of listeners, access to radio, determined by poverty, age, gender and levels of education, should be taken into account.

Especially when it comes to peace building the ‘real’ aims and intentions of media need to be revealed since not doing so can perpetuate violence. Because media are part of broader social negotiations, the ‘pure’ concept of community media should be let loose and an integration of media with governments, civil society, NGOs and the private sector could overcome the fallacies in current media practice. To make roles and positions of media in society clear, more pro-active journalism should be developed that reflects on the backgrounds of the conflict and makes possibilities for resolving conflict transparent.