

# **White Noise**

## **The issues surrounding the coverage of African conflicts on Dutch television**

Summary MA dissertation, by Nynke Douma (September 2005)

### **Abstract**

Few people know that since 1996, conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has claimed almost four million lives. Due to lack of coverage by western media and its superficial treatment of the conflict's backgrounds, even fewer know that the exploitation of natural resources is one of the main factors causing and prolonging Congo's conflict. Common explanations for such 'media deficiencies' range from a lack of public interest to the fact that Africa is too expensive to cover.

The latter in particular holds true for the Netherlands, where recent media reforms, notably those affecting public service television, have further squeezed budgets for foreign reportages. Dutch public service television, therefore, increasingly needs external funding, in particular for African news coverage.

From this angle, in particular Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) seem a logical contributor as the developing world is their 'natural' field of interest. Besides, NGOs increasingly need media attention to publicise their cause and to raise funds.

### **Introduction**

This dissertation looks at the implications of NGO-funded television on journalistic independence, NGO integrity and the quality and quantity of African conflict coverage. Based on first hand experience in filming an NGO-funded documentary in DR Congo and interviews held with Dutch journalists and NGO press officers, it also addresses the practical and ethical dilemmas and conflicts of interest that arise from cooperative reporting on conflict. As they are largely related to the inherently different objectives, work styles and expectations of the two parties, this dissertation also explores how the cooperation between NGOs and journalists can be improved.

It concludes by making the case that the cooperation between NGOs and journalists is an alternative model to conventional public service broadcasting. But given the ethical and practical dilemmas involved, it remains doubtful if it will be to the benefit of African conflict coverage.

This dissertation looks at a number of issues relating to reporting of conflicts in Africa. It in particular explores the relationship between Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the media when reporting such conflicts; and more particularly the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Although western media report a lot on wars in general, there appears to be a disproportionate interest in conflicts that link up with the ideological or political interests of the United States and its coalition partners, like for example the war in Iraq or, what Boyd-Barrett calls “designer wars” on drugs and, more recently, ‘terror’.

Due to such selective media coverage, other conflicts receive only marginal attention. This is in particular the case with African conflicts, and most notably the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Yet, the Congo conflict is one of the most destructive wars ravaging the African continent and has claimed more lives than any conflict since the Second World War. It is also a conflict that is largely caused by economic and political interference by international and regional interests groups that aim to profit from Congo’s richness in natural resources.

In the cases where the Congo conflict does get covered by western media, like with many African wars, reports are often focusing on barbaric hostilities allegedly sparked by ethnic grievances. However, such accounts are limited and inaccurate as they remain restricted to the immediate onset of an event, fail to take into account the underlying causes of crises and exclude follow-up reports. Consequently, western audiences only establish a partial understanding of Africa’s reality. Also, the recurrent encounters with ghastly reports about African violence, generates a feeling of helplessness and indifference among the public. This is often called “compassion fatigue”.

This dissertation addresses some of the reasons why African conflicts are misrepresented and underreported in western media. Attention is paid in particular to the role played by public service television in the Netherlands. Public broadcasting services (PBS) are traditionally renowned for their high quality coverage of global socio-political affairs and have, on ideological and moral grounds, the responsibility to inform and educate the general public on world events, including African conflicts. They also plays an important part in holding western governments accountable for not adequately addressing the economic exploitation that largely causes conflict in Africa; a practice in which those governments are to some degree involved.

However, in recent years, Dutch PBS television has been confronted with changing demands by their audience, fierce competition from commercial media and a decrease in government funding for its programmes. In light of these dynamics, quality coverage of African affairs will become further pressurised and Dutch PBS television will increasingly need to look for external benefactors; in particular to finance the coverage of news from developing countries.

western NGOs seem a logical collaborator because they have numerous projects in those areas of the world. Financial cooperation between PBS and NGOs has also been instigated by changes in the Dutch NGO sector. Due to the reform of development funding policies by the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation, NGOs have become more competitive. Also, the mere claim of ‘doing good’ proves no longer the main determinant for accessing funding and public support. As a result, NGOs find themselves in the process of redefining their organisational identity and are increasingly held accountable for their spending.

As part of this process, NGOs acknowledge the advantage of using various media channels to publicise their cause. But apart from raising awareness about social, political and environmental issues that they feel should be brought to the attention of the world, media attention has predominantly provided a welcome tool for fundraising and public relation

activities. It appears likely that in the years to come, NGOs will increasingly fund PBS television programmes about the developing world.

However, numerous practical and ethical dilemmas arise when journalists and NGOs join forces to report on African conflicts. In part, the dilemmas relate to the inherent dangers of the conflict itself but they are also caused by the nature of cooperation. When a television programme is financed by one or more NGOs, it is difficult for both the NGOs and journalists to operate as normal.

Against a background of increased cooperation between NGOs and the media in the Netherlands, this dissertation concentrates on the more general implications of NGO funding for journalistic independence and the NGO's integrity. It also looks at the inherently different and seemingly incompatible objectives, work styles and expectations of the two parties. These, arguably, increase the likelihood of misunderstandings and conflicts of interest and are especially pronounced when reporting on a complex conflict like the one in DR Congo.

#### Motivation and relevance of study

The interest and motivation to research and analyse the interface between NGOs and the media in reporting on conflicts in Africa, is largely inspired by my participation in filming a documentary in conflict-torn eastern Congo in February 2005. This documentary was funded by the health branch (Memisa) of the Dutch NGO Cordaid.

This dissertation also builds on previous research I carried out on African conflicts, NGOs and the media. For my previous post-graduate degree in Rural Development Sociology, I completed a dissertation about the role of community radio in conflict transformation and peace building processes in Sudan and Uganda (2001-2002). Subsequently, I completed a consultancy assignment for the Dutch NGO Cordaid on peace building policies and practices of local NGOs in DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi (2003).

In addition to these personal experiences, the dissertation is motivated by the need to explore, to a greater depth, the choices, motivations and dilemmas involved in NGO-media cooperation when reporting on complex political emergencies. This is essential because it is a topic scarcely researched and available literature fails to bring those two areas of expertise together as it focuses on NGOs or conflict reporting.

Because this dissertation aims to explore and analyse this information vacuum, it has particular scientific and pragmatic relevance. Hopefully, the findings will contribute to more reflective scientific debates on the co-financed relationship between NGOs and the media. But more importantly, it is hoped that this dissertation will help both NGOs and journalists to rethink the practice of cooperative reporting on African conflicts.

#### Reading guide

Following this introduction, the second chapter presents a synoptic literature review in which the main theoretical topics relevant to this dissertation are discussed. Chapter three explains which research methods and approaches have been employed in this study, and points at some methodological obstacles that need to be taken into account.

Section two, the core of this dissertation, is composed of four analytical features that are written in journalistic style and attempt to appeal to the wider public.

In order to underline the importance to base any kind of conflict reporting on a solid understanding of history, the first article provides a chronological background to the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is argued that, as with many wars in Africa, the seemingly permanent cycle of violence in Congo is the product of a long history of political and economic involvement by regional and international interest groups. It is also argued that the underlying rationale of Congo's war is the exploitation of the country's rich natural resources to the advantage of local warlords, neighbouring governments and multi-national mining corporations.

The second article demonstrates that African conflicts, and most notably the Congo conflict, receive little attention by Dutch PBS television. This is established by presenting a content analysis of the countries covered by the Dutch current affairs programme Netwerk. The article explains what factors influence this lack of media interest in African conflict. In particular, attention is paid to dwindling PBS budgets that, due to recent reforms in the Dutch PBS sector, arguably do not promote future coverage of African affairs by Dutch PBS television.

The third article looks into the factors that facilitate a possible increase in financial cooperation between NGOs and PBS television in the Netherlands. Mainly based on personal interview with Dutch journalists and NGO press officers, questions are raised about the implications of NGO co-financing for journalistic independence and the integrity of NGOs. The article also addresses miscomprehensions and disagreements between NGOs and the media, which largely originate from their different work styles, objectives and expectations.

Based on my participation in the filming of a Dutch NGO-funded documentary in eastern DR Congo earlier this year, the fourth and final article provides an account of how conflict reporting works in practice. The article demonstrates that the process of filming in Congo is beset by numerous practical barriers, ethical dilemmas and conflicting interests. These, it is argued, are partly caused by the close alignment with the supporting NGO but also relate to personal views and considerations of the team members and the overall nature of the Congo conflict.

The dissertation rounds up in section three with the conclusion and reflection. The conclusion provides the aggregate implications of the findings of articles one to four. It will also briefly look at some possible future scenarios for the coverage of Africa and how NGOs and the media may interact and collaborate. The conclusion finalises with some questions and issues that could not be sufficiently addressed. Accordingly, these issues are rendered important for potential follow-up research for which some recommendations are made.

The reflection highlights some personal thoughts and feelings, both positive and negative, on the overall process of researching and writing this dissertation. It addresses the challenges and limitations involved and it touches upon some measures that were taken in order to overcome them.