



## **Media, Participation and Healing: Community-Led Content to Overcome the Trauma of Conflict**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the potential that involving communities in media production has in post-conflict countries to foster healing and reconciliation. The trauma caused by intense violence on individuals and their communities is severe. In this context, communication is important to help people make sense of their realities and engage in a dialogue, both within their social network and with other communities. By either directly or indirectly involving people in the production process, individuals are given the opportunity to tell their stories and express their feelings. At the same time, those who are exposed to these types of productions can gain understanding of others' experiences. All these elements enable individuals to begin healing. This is discussed through a review of four case studies involving different types of media projects and communication designs carried out in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the civil war.

**Key words:** Community media, communication design, participatory media, healing, local peacebuilding, conflict

### **INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores the potential that involving communities in media production has in post-conflict countries to foster healing and reconciliation. Rather than focusing on the wider national frame and considering issues of democracy and governance that need to be addressed in all fragile contexts, this study places its focus on the local level.

At the end of a conflict individuals are left alone to deal with their losses and rebuild their lives, while resentment for the events that have occurred and hostility toward those who are believed to have caused them are strong. The trauma caused by intense violence and deprivation on individuals and their communities is severe. In this context, communication is important to help people make sense of their realities and engage in a



dialogue, both within their social network and with other communities; this allows them to share their experience of grief and understand the impact the conflict has had on everyone's life. Participation in media production can offer a platform to make this possible. By either directly or indirectly involving people in the production process, individuals are given the opportunity to tell their stories and express their feelings. At the same time, those who are exposed to these types of productions can gain understanding and strength from others' experiences. All these elements enable individuals to begin healing.

This article reviews four media projects carried out in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the civil war. The discussion sheds light on how – in post-conflict settings – the participation of local community members in media production facilitates specific practices that help to initiate the process of healing from the trauma caused by the war. This is framed through an introduction of the literature on trauma and healing and a discussion of the main critiques advanced towards current approaches in this field; selected media theories that bring to light the impact that these types of media can have on both their producers and their audience in this context are also examined.

### **MEDIA INTERVENTIONS FOR COHESION AND PEACE**

In spite of the existence and the implementation of several projects within it, there appears to be a lack of theoretical analysis of the role that community participation in media can play in post-violence and fragile contexts. More specifically, while a discussion has taken place on the field of Peace Media (presented effectively in the work of Singh, 2013), this remains driven by a logic that concentrates on media productions addressing the causes of and issues connected to the conflict and promoting peace. In so doing, the focus is not necessarily placed on changing the complex networks of relationships and power at the grassroots that can both hinder and facilitate peace.

Baú (2014, 2015a, 2015b) has demonstrated how participatory media can be effective at transforming conflict between communities within a framework of Communication for Development. This work will attempt to bring together media theory and notions of trauma and healing to demonstrate how productions characterised by community-led content can be used as a tool for reconciliation and healing in countries that were affected by war. In this discussion, particular focus will be given to the effects that the introduction of the concept of 'participation' has had in progressively shaping community media interventions.



Through a paper titled *The Case for Communication*, Warnock et al. (2007) have highlighted how the media can reflect the different voices that make up society, the different issues that concern it and the clash of opinions within it. The authors emphasise that the media are a platform for political and cultural expression, as well as self-realisation of individuals and groups; as a result, they also have the potential to play a role in social cohesion by enabling debate on social and cultural issues as societies deal with change:

The media can provide forums for discussing changes facing societies, new ideas, social and political conflicts, as well as presenting emerging role models [...] (Warnock et al., 2007, p.29).

Rodriguez (2001) illustrates the potential of what the author terms *citizen media* in facilitating processes of social change, also in violent contexts. Through participatory processes, media can foster empowerment: "social structures of inequality and injustice result in entire communities feeling disempowered and paralysed. Involvement in citizens' media projects strengthens people's sense of self and their confidence in their own potential to act in the world" (p.147). In addition, these productions can connect isolated communities: "facilitating alternative communication networks, citizens' media link communities and people who have much to gain from joining forces in projects for collective action" (p.147).

Another author who has looked at the healing effect of community participation in media in post-conflict situations is Harris (2009). In her analysis of an ethnographic case study of a participatory video workshop with rural women in post-conflict Fiji, Harris (2009) highlights the need for participatory practices in conjunction with community-based reconciliation efforts to encourage dialogue between alienated groups. Through an exploration of the idea of participatory media as a dialogic tool, the author shows how this methodology can help bring to light the connections rather than the disconnections between people.

Waisbord (2001) reinforces these concepts by underlining that these types of media are not simply instruments of transmission, but their primary aim is that of *creating* communications; this entails exchanging views and involving different members. In an extensive study aimed at *Examining Peace-Oriented Media in Areas of Violent Conflict*, Bratić (2008, p.492) refers to the work of Gerbner (1986) to discuss the role that the media play in creating a "symbolic sphere of our existence". The author concludes that if



the symbolic environment is characterised by peace-oriented messages through the use of the media, the same media environment can lead to a cultural transformation of violence.

### **CONTEXTUALISING PARTICIPATION IN PEACEBUILDING**

Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) stress how the traditional top-down peacebuilding paradigm has attracted a number of critiques, directed in particular towards assumptions on the local inability to counteract structural powers exerted by elites. The authors emphasise how these beliefs not only demonstrate the limited Western understanding of peace, but are also used as justifications for external peacebuilding interventions and for the questionable outcomes they have historically led to.

Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013), again, focus their discussion on the importance of the 'local turn' in the approach to peacebuilding work. This turn recognises that initiatives aimed at rebuilding peace should be designed to support local actors rather than driving their work. It also acknowledges the broad range of local agents that operate in both conflict and post-conflict environment, and that have the potential to initiate peace. A localised peace process may simply stem from the pursuit of the everyday economic, cultural and social tasks that were disrupted by the violence; this allows different groups to develop new bonds, realign diverging perspectives and re-legitimise one another. These localised processes may not be clearly visible at the international level and have their basis in the notions of tolerance and coexistence rather than in technical conflict resolution mechanisms. The 'local turn' in peacebuilding has also been driven by the increased assertiveness of local actors who have become aware of the limited effectiveness as well as duration of formal peacebuilding programmes and have taken on an activist role to bring local voices to the forefront through different platforms.

At the same time, while the recent peacebuilding and transitional justice literature has experienced this 'turn' to the local, a heavy critique of that literature is advanced by Paffenholz (2014), who highlights how the local has been over-romanticised and presented as the most effective, inclusive and equal way forward than anything coming from outside. Paffenholz (2014) claims that it is incorrect to assume that participatory and 'local' approaches are not inherently less exclusionary or dominated by power than others, as these processes may in fact open themselves up to the manipulation of power on the local level, which is often gendered and gentrified. Paffenholz (2014) also criticises what she refers to as 'hybrid peace governance structures, that bring together both international and local actors into a joint framework of norms, values and institutions' (p.863). The idea behind hybridity is that the intertwined relationships between internal



and external organisations can lead to greater results; however, as this author states, they are ultimately 'partnerships of outsiders and insiders beyond the naïve claim of 'local knows best' and international technical superiority' (p.863), and are often implemented at the expenses of local peacebuilding and governance structures that might form.

It can be argued that examples of this hybrid model are the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) that form during the reconstruction phase of a country. These operate on the basis of a Western-driven paradigm and often through externally driven structures with the aim of including local voices in redressing the wrongs of the conflict and with the premise of engendering a healing process. The participatory model adopted in TRCs has historically been contentious and has led to various scholars questioning its impact on those directly affected by the conflict (see for example the work of Millar, 2001, on the Sierra Leone TRC).

#### **PARTICIPATION IN MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON AUDIENCES**

Through the work and reflections of various authors, participation has been represented by means of different ladders. In international development work, ladders recognise the various levels of local people's involvement in an initiative and list distinct activities and relationships that can take shape. Kanji and Greenwood (2001) identify five types of participatory approaches:

- *compliance*, where tasks with incentives are assigned but the agenda and process is directed by outsiders;
- *consultation*, where local opinions are sought, outsiders analyse and decide the course of action;
- *cooperation*, where local people work with outsiders to determine priorities; the responsibility to direct the process lies with outsiders;
- *co-learning*, where local people and outsiders share knowledge, create new understanding and work together to form action plans;
- *collective action*, where local people set their own agenda and mobilise to carry it out in the absence of outsiders (p.5).

The last four approaches in this scale can be connected to the four models of participation in media recognised by Carpentier (2007). The first one involves the element of membership of those participating (whether formal or informal), while the



second model does not include any membership structure. The third model engages with facilitation of access, interaction and participation, while the fourth one considers only access and interaction as its main components. For the last two frameworks described, participation is facilitated at the macro-level and we can refer to it as 'semi-participation'.

This brief introduction to the meanings of participation is explanatory for the different extents to which local communities have been involved in the projects that this study analyses. The media production forms reviewed herein are characterised by different levels of participation, all of which make their content led by communities' views and voices. To clarify further, I am distinguishing two ways in which participation of local communities in media production can occur:

- ▣ directly: people have worked on and achieved the production of certain media outputs, both through their technical skills and as main informants of the editorial content;
- ▣ indirectly: local people have been the main source of information and have been consulted in a participatory way to produce the content of the different outputs.

Looking at the broader spectrum of Media & Communication theory may serve to remind us how these media can be effective not only on those involved in their production but also on their audiences in post-conflict settings. The first model that can help us understand the effect on the audience of media productions created through the involvement of the community is the *uses and gratification* model (Blumler and Katz, 1974). This explains how audience members look for media content that seems to be the most gratifying, where the level of perceived gratification is based on the degree of need-fulfilment that a specific content offers. The relevance in our context is given by the fact that needs may often involve factors such as orientation, security, interaction and tension-release (Windahl, Signitzer and Olsen, 2009). People may seek in the media reassurance about their lifestyle, their values and their decisions, and verify that these are shared and accepted by other people too (Watson, 2008). According to a scheme of 'media-person interactions' offered by McQuail et al. (1972, quoted in Windahl et al., 2009), two of the motivations that push people towards media exposure are:

- *Personal identity*: self-reference, reality exploration, value reinforcement;
- *Integration and social interaction*: finding out about the conditions of others, making it possible to relate to others, finding out how to play one's roles, establishing a basis for social interaction (p.199).



It follows that if media productions aimed at healing and reconciliation are created with the involvement of community members, they will more likely be provided with those elements that are shared within that particular social network and therefore offer a content that addresses community's needs and generates a gratifying effect.

From his social cognitive theory, Bandura (2002) has developed a model that explains how the media can trigger social learning. The models offered by the media, such as the characters in a soap-opera, can inform as well as motivate individuals in adopting a certain behaviour. People are not immediately persuaded to engage with new practices when their adoption involves risks and costs; however, they are more likely to do so if they can see the advantages that can be gained from them. Thus, the models provided by the media can accelerate social diffusion. By exemplifying and legitimising a new behaviour while simultaneously showing preferences and evaluative reactions to it, the values and opinions of the observer can be altered and adoption directly encouraged.

When promoting change in a community by way of the media, Bandura (2002, p.141) identifies two communication pathways through which the information is channelled. One is the *direct pathway*, when the media directly motivate and guide the audience towards the desired change. The other one is a *socially mediated pathway*, where the information received through the media becomes also part of the message exchange that takes place within the social network, and is therefore provided with the incentive of social support. The social milieu is the most effective field for change to be promoted.

Finally, besides conveying knowledge on the adoption of the desired behaviour, social modelling must be designed to build self-efficacy. This is the primary factor that determines whether or not positive change can be achieved (Bandura, 2002). Because of the importance of perceived efficacy in people's lives, media programmes that help to strengthen people's beliefs in the active role they can play to bring about change are more likely to be successful. People must be made aware of the obstacles they will encounter by exemplifying potential problem situations, and through the models' actions they can be provided with effective and realistic tools to overcome difficulties (Bandura, 2004).

The benefits of the media's ability to enhance individuals' self-efficacy are particularly valuable in a post-conflict scenario, where people have experienced traumatic losses and are engaging in the effort of re-building their lives. This is also explained by Bandura and Benight (2004) who state that 'there is nothing more central or pervasive than people's beliefs in their efficacy [...] to exercise control over events that affect their lives. A sense



of personal efficacy is the foundation of human agency' (p.1131). When provided with a solid sense of coping efficacy, people develop the strengths to follow courses of action that lead them to transform a harmful environment into a benevolent one. This is due to that fact that the perception of self-efficacy reduces stress and anxiety and gives confidence to react. People themselves are the actual makers of the psychic environment they live in, and focusing on the self's ability to cope with a situation is crucial in achieving emotional wellbeing following a traumatising event (Bandura and Benight, 2004).

### **THE PROCESS OF HEALING**

The impact of war on civilians extends well beyond the period of active warfare, with its effects lasting usually for years after the fighting. Krippner and McIntyre (2003) explain that the expression *war trauma* refers to

...the effects of war as an extreme stressor that threatens human existence, acting upon a human being or a group of people. At an individual level, this may entail physical or psychosocial consequences, such as the inability to talk or relate to other human beings. At a collective level, war trauma is meant to include all the health, social, economic, cultural and political consequences of war stress. War stress shatters the individual and his or her network, assaulting the integrity of their world. Irreparable material and kin losses, as well as the loss of everyday routines, values, and important rituals, render collective healing more difficult (p.7).

Individual and collective healings cannot be looked at as entirely distinct and they appear to be in a 'dialectical' relationship with each other. However, while the process of individual healing from trauma deals primarily with the needs and interests of the individual and how they relate to their community, it is difficult to identify a specific practice that traumatised groups should undertake in order to heal themselves (Nyquist Potter, 2006).

The work of Stepakoff et al. (2006) with Liberian and Sierra Leonean civil wars survivors has shown how helping people in developing a more positive self-image as survivors rather than victims can enhance their awareness of the coping strategies they had used in the past and might therefore use again in the future. When the memories recalled





involve the role that others have played in one's survival, this can also be helpful in developing trust between individuals and can help re-establish interpersonal relationships. Ultimately, what is crucial is for people to recognise that the pain and grief that seem to be purely personal are actually shared by the majority of community members.

Broadly, healing comprehends all those processes that help the individual to understand painful events they have experienced, assimilate and process grief, deal with anxiety and anger. As previously mentioned, although these processes mainly occur at a personal level, we need to recognise that in instances such as those of violent conflicts not only isolated beings but entire communities share the same traumatic experience in a socially mediated way. For this reason, a growing number of agencies are attempting to move away from psychosocial interventions at the individual level and are starting to create programmes that focus on social reconciliation (Boyden, 2001).

In response to the increasing diffusion of this psychosocial framework in peace building work, Pupavac (2004) draws attention to the 'therapeutic security paradigm' that has come to dominate current interventions. This scholar argues that

...it is one issue to show that people express emotional ill-being and another to pathologise their emotional ill-being as a disorder which explains the prevailing political, economic and social conditions. The pathologisation of populations problematizes their right to self-government and encourages the development of a new mode of international therapeutic governance entailing new parameters of external intervention (p.150).

This framework is becoming utilised to legitimise the involvement of international actors in state-building and reconstruction processes at the end of a conflict. Within this scheme, TRCs and war tribunals are regarded as instruments that allow traumatised populations to reach closure and that need to be an essential component of post-conflict policies. Yet, as Pupavac (2004) asserts, 'rather than securing the community, international emotional management may be jeopardising local strategies, destabilising communal ties and increasing individuals' vulnerability' (p.162). Within this context, media productions created through a participatory approach are instead provided with those cultural and social insights that are needed for targeted interventions aimed at community healing.



Overall, a large part of the consequences of a conflict are not always as observable as physical injury, disease, or economic devastation. Some of them involve psychological, social and cultural effects (McKay, 2004). This is why when dealing with experiences of trauma, it is particularly important to go beyond verbal communication and facilitate emotional and mental communication too. Thus reflecting, analysing and openly discussing sensitive issues in a structured environment – managed by the community itself – helps people to communicate more effectively (Adu-Gyamfi, 2003). Enabling a process that allows those whose voices remain usually unheard to speak up is empowering, as it gives the opportunity to local peoples to choose their own priorities (Summerfield, 1991). Giving communities the opportunity to participate in the creation of media content can offer the right space for this to happen.

### **THE SIERRA LEONEAN CONFLICT AND ITS IMPACT ON THE POPULATION**

A large part of the conflicts taking place in developing countries are characterised by terror along with a premeditated effort to induce psychosocial violence. The effects caused by this type of violence are as substantial as the number of dead and the devastation caused to the infrastructure of a country (Summerfield, 1991). From 1991 to 2002 the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) led the people of Sierra Leone through horrific years of war. The main cause of the conflict was represented by control over resources – particularly natural ones - by a few leaders. An estimated 70,000 people died during the war and approximately 2.6 millions were displaced (UNDP, 2006).

A prevalence of forced migration, family separation and lack of access to reliable information about the situation characterised the years of conflict. Violent disruption to the every-day life was brought about through brutal killings, arson and looting. People lost family, friends and all their belongings. Children were subjected to molestation, drugs, and forced recruitment into the armed forces, while women and girls were raped. The national economy collapsed as a consequence of the destruction of the country's resource base, which disintegrated the productive sectors and initiated high unemployment. These factors led to a state of inertia in which everyone was left to search for their own way of surviving (Abdullah, 2004).

The case studies introduced below were implemented in Sierra Leone in the aftermath of the civil war. The aim of all projects was that of healing and reconciliation, and each initiative was designed around the involvement of community members in the media production process.



### **CASE STUDY 1: *Reel Peace Project***

Methodology: Film-Making and Video

The project aimed at contributing to cultural and social reconciliation after the end of the civil war, whilst simultaneously developing much needed media skills. Implemented by non-governmental organisation (NGO) ScriptNet, it received support from UNESCO, the Commonwealth Media Development Fund and the British Council in Freetown. The initiative started with scriptwriting training opportunities. Following a competitive scriptwriting contest, six of the most promising scripts that could demonstrate some of the human stories of war, peace and reconciliation were selected as a basis for a directing and technical training course. At the end of the course, production grants were given to the producer/director teams to make their short films. These were then screened in an exhibition at the British Council in Sierra Leone and subsequently distributed both at a national and international level.

[Adapted from UNESCO portal]

### **CASE STUDY 2: *Never Again campaign***

Methodology: Participatory Theatre and Video

The project involved the creation of peacebuilding materials through collaboration with communities affected by the war. Following a comprehensive needs assessment with target beneficiaries, Action Aid contracted a team of performing artists that worked with victims as well as ex-fighters and traditional social institutions in Mile 91, Bo, Kenema and Freetown to develop peacebuilding messages that were then recorded on both audio and video and disseminated nationwide.

[Adapted from Action Aid Sierra Leone, Youth Department Annual Report 2001]

### **CASE STUDY 3: *Heeding the Voiceless***

Methodology: Oral Testimony and Radio

Through a radio project using Oral Testimonies set up by the Panos Institute West Africa (PIWA), between December 2001 and May 2003 several Oral Testimony Radio Training Workshops were organized in Sierra Leone. The workshops involved seven producers from independent private stations in Sierra Leone. Following the training,



three of the stations (Radio Sky FM, Radio Kiss FM and Radio Democracy in Sierra Leone) developed, produced and broadcast oral testimony radio documentary programs during a period of 18 months. The documentaries focused on the general theme of Peace, Democracy and Citizenship, with a special focus on reconciliation.

[Adapted from Communication Initiative website]

#### **CASE STUDY 4: *Development Through Radio Project (DTRP)***

##### Methodology: Radio Listening Clubs

In collaboration with the Forum for African Media Women, the Forum of Conscience (FOC) - a human rights NGO - set out to establish a 'development through radio project' (DTRP) in Sierra Leone that would provide a channel for women to discuss issues that were important to them. The FOC acted as the overall facilitator for the DTRP and served the DTR groups through a DTR coordinator. The coordinator received the recorded audiotapes from the groups and provided a manifest containing basic information including the date on which the recording has taken place, composition of the group, and a summary of the discussions. She then handed this to the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service for editing and broadcasting. Generally, both responses and issues from the women were edited into one 22-minute broadcast.

[Adapted from Communication Initiative website]

## **DESIGN AND METHOD**

A time-span of eight years from the end of the civil war in Sierra Leone was chosen for the case studies selection. Within this timeframe, organisations on the ground focused on implementing projects aiming at post-conflict reconciliation and had the opportunity to bring these to an end, while also carrying out those activities of reflection on the process and evaluation reporting that have been used as secondary data to explore the cases. The projects were also selected on the basis of the methodologies used for media production, which saw the participation of local communities at different levels.

With a qualitative approach, the secondary data gathering involved the review of a number of publications connected to each case. These included not only formal documents, such as academic articles written as a follow up to one or more of the activities implemented, but also evaluation reports, annual reports and final observations. Although not formalised in an interview structure, personal correspondence with those directly involved in the projects has also informed the study. Visual and audio



documentation – where the production language allowed it – has been reviewed. A list of formal publications that assisted in the case study analysis is available at the end of this article<sup>1</sup>.

Clearly, the limitation of this study lies in the fact that the effects of the projects on their beneficiaries is primarily based on the perceptions of those who played a part in the development and implementation of these initiatives, rather than on the views of the recipients. For this reason, it was difficult to provide a comprehensive discussion that included the weaknesses or shortfalls of the projects. Yet, the information gathered is helpful to provide some evidence and guidance on the adoption of these types of media designs and production methods in communities affected by war.

## **ANALYSIS**

The analysis is built around two key questions that aim to ascertain the projects' perceived ability to create dialogue and initiate healing. The answers were extrapolated from the knowledge gained through projects' documents, publications and impressions of those who administered the activities.

### ***Question 1. How did the production of the different media formats presented in the case studies engage people in a communication/dialogic process?***

#### ***Case study 1 – Reel Peace Project***

The double aim of this project was to actively engage youth in national development by providing them with media skills and to produce dramas that could be used to sensitise the public on particular issues emerging from the war. As project director Ian Masters (2004) explains, '[the] project aimed to bring writers and directors together to collaborate on short films that could demonstrate some of the human stories of the war, peace and reconciliation' (p.4).

Initially, a 'story search' was conducted in order to encourage people from different communities to develop ideas and think about how to represent them visually. This initiative did not necessarily target film-makers, but also ordinary people who had a powerful story to tell. Later, participants were enabled to develop their scripts during a media training involving workshops, seminars and one-to-one tutorials, and to produce a film<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Phone conversation with Adam Partridge, Reel Peace Sierra Leone Project Manager, on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009.



### Case study 2 – Never Again Campaign

Through the facilitation of theatre artists, the project engaged the participants in a story-telling process using techniques such as songs, proverbs, riddles and skits, while drama was used to create direct interaction between people. The project report section on the organisation's annual review specifies that for the implementation of this methodology, care was taken to include participants from all sides - victims, perpetrators, as well as other community youths - in order to ensure that everyone's voices were heard. This also helped to bring to light the dehumanising ordeal the war had had on all parties.

Through a period ranging from four to ten days, facilitators worked with participants to help them develop their stories and weave them into a drama in which they were reproducing their real lives. The final plays were then video-taped. Using a Mobile Peace Unit with cinematic facilities, the video materials produced were disseminated to community settlements and market centres, schools, colleges, military and police barracks, ensuring that discussions were entertained: 'since most people could not afford TV and video for home use, this strategy served as a means on entertainment for the community. People were able to meet old friends and make new ones. Old scores were settled through "experience sharing" i.e. a session during the campaign when people would narrate their experiences during the war and make new resolutions for the way forward for peace' (Action Aid, 2001, p.11).

### Case study 3 – Heeding the Voiceless

The methodology of oral testimony is based on a specific interview method in which the narrator, rather than the interviewer, influences the shape and content of the interview. An oral testimony goes deeper than a classic interview and the narrator is encouraged to talk about certain topics through his or her experiences, values and priorities (Sane and Deflander, 2006).

These recorded interviews, which usually lasted several hours, were adapted for community radio to a documentary format by selecting the dominant topic. According to the reflections on the project pulled together in a book by Sane and Deflander (2006) from PIWA, combining oral testimonies with community radio enhanced the capacity of radio stations to listen to and give voice to their communities in a time in which dialogue was most needed.

### Case study 4 – Development Through Radio Project (DTRP)

While community radio stations benefit mostly those living within the vicinity of the radio station, DTR seeks an audience much broader and gives marginalised groups the



opportunity to form partnerships with existing community / mainstream radio to get their voices heard. DTR goes a step further than traditional community radio and endeavours to bring on board those with no access to any type of radio, while attempting to create a sense of media ownership.

In her article written to disseminate the experience learned from the initiative, project manager Mercy Wambui (2005) explains how the DTRP in Sierra Leone was active in 30 communities in the North, South, and Eastern Provinces. The community groups ranged in size from 30 to 80 members, aged 14 to 60 years. The club members included widows, some amputees and others affected by the war due to bereavement and enslavement. The project aimed to offer a space for interaction and healing of wounds inflicted by the war. When conducting a baseline analysis, women had indicated that they found strength in being part of a group; the issues aired on weekly broadcast were therefore first discussed, determined and agreed upon by the group, and not by the radio station.

***Question 2. How did this type of communication set in motion the process of healing from the trauma that was caused as a result of the war?***

*Case study 1 – Reel Peace Project*

The six short-films produced by the project dealt with the subjects of ex-combatants trying to re-integrate into their communities and being rejected; children traumatised by the atrocities of the war who were now unable to confront others; women who had been sexually abused and were trying to recover; issues of stigma and blame<sup>2</sup>.

The Freetown-based National Forum for Human Rights organised several screenings of the Reel Peace films across the country. The organisation's director explained that the films had a great impact on the population, particularly in the internal areas of Sierra Leone. People were able to identify themselves and their communities with the stories. Those that obtained a major reaction were the ones dealing with rebel re-integration, as almost all families could relate to it. A mix of anger and compassion was elicited in the public, and many cried during the screening. The films seemed to have brought to light those issues that people were trying not to think about<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See: *Scars*, by John Solo Fofanah; *King of the Stalls*, by Jonathan Bundu; *The Victims*, by Mohamed Sheriff; *The Outcasts*, by Brian James and *Hole in the Wall*, by Sarah King.

<sup>3</sup> Email correspondence with Alfred Carew, Director of the National Forum of Human Rights (NFHR), Sierra Leone, 25<sup>th</sup> July 2009



### Case study 2 – Never Again Campaign

This nationwide peace building initiative aimed at the identification of the primary causes of the war in Sierra Leone, allowing victims and perpetrators to share their experiences and bring to light their feelings elicited by the atrocities of the conflict. A 30-minute video presentation on the causes and effects of the war – comprising a remix of the peace video messages created in various locations – was typically played. Sessions were held during which people could narrate their experiences during the war and make resolutions for the way forward to peace. Through the public screenings of the plays that had been video-taped, discussions were facilitated on the issues raised as a means of starting a dialogue whose primary objective was building peace within the community as well as encouraging the reintegration of ex-combatants (Action Aid, 2001).

Spencer (2008), who carried out a study of this project, highlights how after the screenings and subsequent discussions, people would at times organise traditional ceremonies to receive ex-combatants back into the community. The author explains that the dramas were able to develop a strong understanding between victims and perpetrators, and this fostered forgiveness.

### Case study 3 – Heeding the Voiceless

Through its implementation in the aftermath of the civil conflict, the project contributed to fostering understanding by enabling the adverse side to hear the deep motivations of the narrator, their fears, aspirations and beliefs. During the broadcasting listeners realised that those involved - the narrators - were ordinary people who had experienced the same suffering due to the war. The interviews also encouraged those who were listening to regain their power and confidence to participate in things that concerned them, their localities and their nation. As Beresford Taylor from Radio Democracy (a radio station participating in Heeding the Voiceless project) stated, 'we broadcast an Oral Testimony by a former commander of RUF militia, and the RUF was no longer the villain' (in Sane and Deflander, 2006, p.13)

### Case study 4 – Development Through Radio Project (DTRP)

The radio groups provided a channel through which women could voice their views on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process, talk about reconciliation and bring gender issues to the fore of the process. The project provided a forum that helped them feel heard and empowered to find solutions to their problems. A qualitative study conducted by FoC gathered feedback directly from the women: '[t]he extent of the loss and trauma experienced by the DTRP women participants was extreme. The [assessment] established that the [project] had brought many changes to the lives of the members. By





having a voice on SLBS [Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service], they have been assisted implementing a number of major priority areas' (Wambui, 2005, p.55) Additionally, when asked what they thought the benefits from the project they had been taking part into were, the groups indicated the ability to come together and talk (Wambui, 2005).

### **DRAWING FROM THE DATA**

While this small study is unable to provide specific measures in relation to the impact of the projects discussed, a positive indication on the role that community participation in media plays in a post-conflict country seems to emerge. The documents reviewed and the conversations held with relevant stakeholders reveal various degrees of engagement with the healing process that all projects seem to incorporate. The mode of communication built into the projects' design involves a dialogic component that encourages people to share their traumatic experiences. This process does not necessarily initiate direct conversation, but it rather develops an exchange by way of various conduits represented, in the instances reviewed here, by the different media formats.

The cases appear to suggest that theatre as well as video and radio outputs have provided a platform to share stories and ventilate feelings. Moreover, thanks to the community-led content characterising each medium, the beneficiaries were not only those directly involved in the productions but also their audiences. The stories told in a mediated way became part of communities' discussions and set in motion a broader debate. It is worth highlighting the focus that most of the projects placed on working with participants in attempting to identify and understand the causes of the war and how its consequences had affected different groups in different ways. Emphasis was also on offering solutions to the problems that had arisen.

The participatory methodologies that characterise each media format allowed people to choose the subjects that were important to them and communicate them to their peers. Moreover, thanks to the wide reach offered by the media, messages were received also by other communities and created a link between those who were on opposite sides at the time of the conflict. By listening to each other's experience, people were able to make sense of both realities.

Whilst an analysis of the weaknesses and limitations of the selected cases cannot be carried out from the available data, it is important to acknowledge that also in these types of projects both cultural and social dynamics play an important role. Issues of power can determine whose voices are being heard and what stories are being told. Yet,



enabling community members to be the drivers of local peacebuilding processes using their knowledge, experience, communication and media skills can be a more effective avenue for groups to uncover a healing practice that comes from within rather than without, and which can ultimately transform trauma.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper aimed to illustrate the impact of media productions whose content is led by the views and voices of local communities in post-conflict countries. A brief literature review on the impact of media interventions for peace has highlighted the potential that media productions can offer when participation becomes one of its core elements. Subsequently, a discussion on the involvement of both individuals and their communities in the process of healing and reconciliation after conflict has been offered through a theoretical review of the main critiques around the notions of trauma, peace building approaches and local participation. At the same time, an assessment of existing media theories has been conducted to bring to light the positive impact that media productions created through community participation can have on their audience within this context.

This was followed by the analysis of four different case studies of NGO projects implemented in post-conflict Sierra Leone, which has highlighted some of the benefits that both a direct and indirect involvement of local community members in media productions can have on the wider community. In particular, it revealed ways in which these media can create connections between different communities and foster reconciliation, acting as a vehicle to share stories.

Overall, the discussion presented here suggests that through the application of direct and indirect community participation in the content development process, media productions can serve as an important communication channel. Where communities have been divided by violence and destruction, facilitating communication through the introduction and use of community-led content on diverse media platforms can contribute to creating a shared understanding of the conflict, re-establishing human relationships and rebuilding peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Formal publications that assisted in the case study analysis are:

Action Aid (2001). *Youth Development and Social Reintegration*, Annual Report. Freetown: Action Aid Sierra Leone.

Masters, I. (2004). *Reel Peace: a film and television development project for Sierra Leone*. Freetown: ScriptNet. [unpublished report]



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