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Media-Related Peacebuilding in Processes of Conflict Transformation

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1 Introduction: Connecting the Dots[1]

Forging Peace, a much-quoted study on media interventions in peacemaking processes, identified "a dearth of attention" to the role played by media and journalists in conflict transformation (Thompson/Price 2002, 3). That was 13 years ago. Today, in 2015, an examination of the analytical debate surrounding the interplay of media, conflict transformation and peacebuilding reveals that the academic understanding of this triad (and the documentation of practical experiences) still is patchy (Hoffmann/Hawkins 2015; also Gilboa 2009; Kalathil 2008). A new study finds that relevant experiences and issues are frequently examined in isolation "rather than [being integrated] into the 'mainstream' topics of peace and conflict research" (Hoffmann/Hawkins 2015, 6).

While the role of media and journalists in armed conflicts is a classic theme of political science and international relations, the focus has predominantly been on its problematic aspects (Hawkins 2011; Hoffmann 2013; Hoffmann/Hawkins 2015). In many armed conflicts, media have exercised a manipulative influence and contributed to the escalation of violence.[2] Media are also often seen to follow their own "logic", being predominantly geared towards maximising attention, effect and income (Altheide 2004; Hepp 2011).

This article's emphasis will be on media's constructive potential and the contributions that media and journalists have made, and are making, to peacebuilding. Such a focus seems pertinent at a time when the attention of the public, policy-makers and media is drawn predominantely towards the conflict-escalting roles of media as seen in various forms (drone warfare, cyber attacks by terrorist organisations on global news agencies, the effective recruiting strategies of armed actors using social media like twitter, youtube, etc.).

Through their depiction of the causes, progression and perspectives of a conflict, media co-determine the significance assigned to it. In this way they influence the perception of those directly involved, whether political and financial decision-makers or the civilian population. What the media do not do, however, is to hold up a mirror to the society – a mirror simply reflects reality. Instead, they construct their own interpretations of reality with the information and news they produce.

The hypotheses of this article are threefold. Firstly, I assert that the work of media and journalists can play an important role in the transformation of conflicts that have escalated. In what way, depends on how constructive their work is. Hence, secondly, I claim that their constructive potential in turn hinges on the manner in which journalists depict the underlying causes, development and dynamics of a conflict (Kempf 2003; Keeble et al. 2010; Lynch /Galtung 2010). Thirdly, I posit that this constructive potential also depends on the degree to which media actively engage with local actors for peace (or local "peace constituencies", see Berghof Foundation 2012, 72) in their work.

However, it must be emphasised at the outset that to date, the evidence base for all claims concerning media's potential effect on conflict escalation or conflict transformation is thin and often anecdotal. In the current debates between peacebuilding practitioners, policy-makers, donor organisations and media representatives over the role of media and journalists in peacebuilding, conclusions sometimes appear to be drawn too hastily. The same applies for the opportunities presented by new information technologies and social media. It is here that I see the specific task for researcher-practitioner cooperation. Together they could strengthen the knowledge base concerning media-related peacebuilding through improved monitoring and evaluation as well as comprehensive research. I will briefly return to this point in the conclusion.

1 I thank all interview partners, as well as Beatrix Austin for her very helpful editorial guidance and Julia Hoffmann and Christoph Spurk for their insightful comments and suggestions. Many thanks for partial translation and proofreading go to Glenine Hamlyn.

2 For an overview on the destructive potential of media and journalists' reporting see Orgeret/Sobhan 2012; Internews 2013; Taylor/Dolan 2013; Thussu/Freedman 2003; ÖSFK 2007 and Carruthers 2011. Many of these works also point to ways of fostering more constructive roles and reporting.

In the remainder of the article, using a critical-conceptual approach, I set out to contextualise the work of media and journalists as actors in peacebuilding processes and in related efforts to constructively transform conflicts. Examples from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan will be discussed in depth in an attempt to show how peacebuilding processes can be opened up and made more inclusive when peacebuilders work together with media and journalists "as equal partners" rather than perceiving them solely as strategic instruments.

The following section discusses the specific conditions that communication and perception in violence-ridden contexts pose for journalistic reporting on the underlying causes, developments and dynamics of conflict. It looks at the importance of involving local populations and media in such efforts. *Section Three* examines a case of peacebuilding-related media activities in the Democratic Repulic of the Congo. *Section Four* assesses the prospectives and limits of social media and information technologies for enhanced conflict transformation processes. The concluding section summarises the findings and proposes ways forward for media professionals, researchers, donors and policy-makers.

2 More Than Conflict Catalysts: Media, Journalists and Conflict Transformation

Through their work, media and journalists have the potential to make practical peacebuilding more inclusive and thus more sustainable.

Peacebuilding unfolds as a process. It involves efforts to constructively transform (violent) conflicts, and to work towards sustainable and peace-supporting structures. Peacebuilding is a multi-layered process involving all social strata, including decision-makers, civil society actors, affected populations and marginalised groups – actors in various positions and at different levels of society (see, for example, Berghof Foundation 2012, 22ff., 59ff).

As implied by the term "media-related peacebuilding", the methodological approaches and concrete activities implemented within this framework represent only a fraction of peacebuilding as a comprehensive societal endeavour. In this area, practitioners seek cooperation with media and journalists "as equal partners". The results of this cooperation could include, for example, poster campaigns to combat sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); the creation of radio listeners' clubs in remote areas to distribute conflict-relevant information in affected communities; the organisation of in-field round-table discussions on peacebuilding-related themes broadcast by regional and national media; productions of soap operas; and the training of journalists. Compared to classical media assistance, media-related peacebuilding activities are characterised by a clearly recognisable focus on contributing to conflict transformation processes.

There are various ways of increasing media's potential in this realm and integrating it into the diverse, intertwined sub-processes of conflict transformation. Before looking at some concrete examples, however, it is useful to reflect on the premises on which, in my opinion, successful media-related peacebuilding is based.

2.1 Communication processes and media roles in conflict settings

Conflict parties often tend to derive the motivation for their actions not from objective facts but from a subjective interpretation of these facts (Kempf 2003, 4). Conflicts are therefore societal constructions – and it is only in this societal framework that they can be deconstructed and transformed into peace-oriented discourses (Kempf 2005, 26). In this context it is important to consider that the communication landscape in countries of conflict is marked by a myriad of competing discourses superimposed on one another. These discourses are constructed and driven by a diversity of social actors, both state and non-state: political parties, ministries, church institutions, NGOs, private companies and media (mainstream and alternative, local and international), as well as the armed forces, the police, armed insurgents, paramilitary groups and private security firms. They employ varying repertoires of resources and opportunities in an attempt to justify and win approval for their own interests while often attempting to delegitimise or suppress alternative discourses.

Conflict actors try to control the flow of communication – and of any reliable information that could damage their interests – using a variety of methods and measures. These range from employing highly paid public relations experts who launch strategic communication, to the destruction of infrastructure and the use of psychological or physical violence against journalists and key actors of civil society. The revocation or non-renewal of broadcasting licences, and the cancellation of funding and advertising, are also used in this way.

At the same time, due to the precarious everyday realities experienced by people living in a heterogeneous landscape of conflicts, the need for reliable information – information that allows them to assess their situation and press for acceptable political action – constantly increases.[3]

A further element of the landscape of communication amidst violence and conflict has to do with perceptions. The more quickly violent clashes, armed conflicts and (civil) wars escalate, and the longer they last, the more distorted and narrow the perception of those involved becomes. The psycho-social impact on people living in the conflict region – among them media professionals (journalists, reporters, editors, camera operators, etc.) – is serious.[4] They all develop a repertoire of socio-psychological strategies for coping with physical and psychological violence (stress, fear, permanent uncertainty, traumata, etc.), and for preserving their sense of identity. In such situations many people reject information that questions their own convictions, worldviews and stereotypes about the "other" or that renders them contradictory or even false (Bar-Tal/Halperin 2013, 940). Accepting such information would create conflicting perceptions, leading one to feel torn (creating cognitive dissonance). "This processing [of information] obstructs and inhibits the penetration of any new, alternative information that could potentially facilitate progress towards peace" (ibid.).

As a consequence, the individual's perception turns inward, focusing on like-minded individuals and seeking, above all, the confirmation of his or her own (group) identity in times of ongoing uncertainty and existential anxiety. The rights and goals of the "others" are contested or even demonised, while one's own rights and needs are idealised. The hardening of what each sees to be his or her necessary positioning in the conflict, combined with protective socio-psychological barriers, fosters the emergence of a self-perpetuating and destructive culture of conflict (Glasl 2007).

On the contested grounds of discourse in divided societies, media, too, use the tools of journalism to construct conflict realities. They offer narrower or, on the other hand, more complex possibilities for interpreting and understanding events every day as they happen.

In this way, media influence the perception of millions of readers, viewers, listeners and internet users. Through their work, media and journalists in conflict situations help to determine whether, and to

3 Essential information includes information about possible flight paths out of combat zones, sources of water, food and medical assistance, one's rights over against state institutions and the movements of armed groups.

4 Journalists or foreign correspondents who travel to a war zone on a short-term basis also bring with them ideological worldviews and biased patterns of perception, albeit sometimes with a less narrow(ed) perspective.

what extent, conflict actors are cognizant of the multiplicity of constructive solutions that could potentially be applied to the conflicting sets of interests.

In none of this are journalists neutral entities. They are actors who follow their own agendas (cf. ASPR 2003; Nerone 2013). Through their work they become entangled in the construction and reconstruction of conflict identities and become a part of them. Information on cause-and-effect relationships relevant to the conflict is selectively chosen and shaped before it reaches its audience, using journalistic practices such as prioritising information, inserting lead sentences, choosing interview partners, agenda setting and framing. Journalists who cover conflicts from remote locations have to weigh up this filtered information and process it a second time; the draft is then vetted by an editor before eventually being approved by the chief editor. Only then are the material's interpretative possibilities released into the market, to land in newspapers, be used by television and radio presenters or appear online. Each of these distribution channels could mean further processing of the material – for example through shortening, rephrasing or reframing – to fit particular formats (see *Figure 1*).[5]

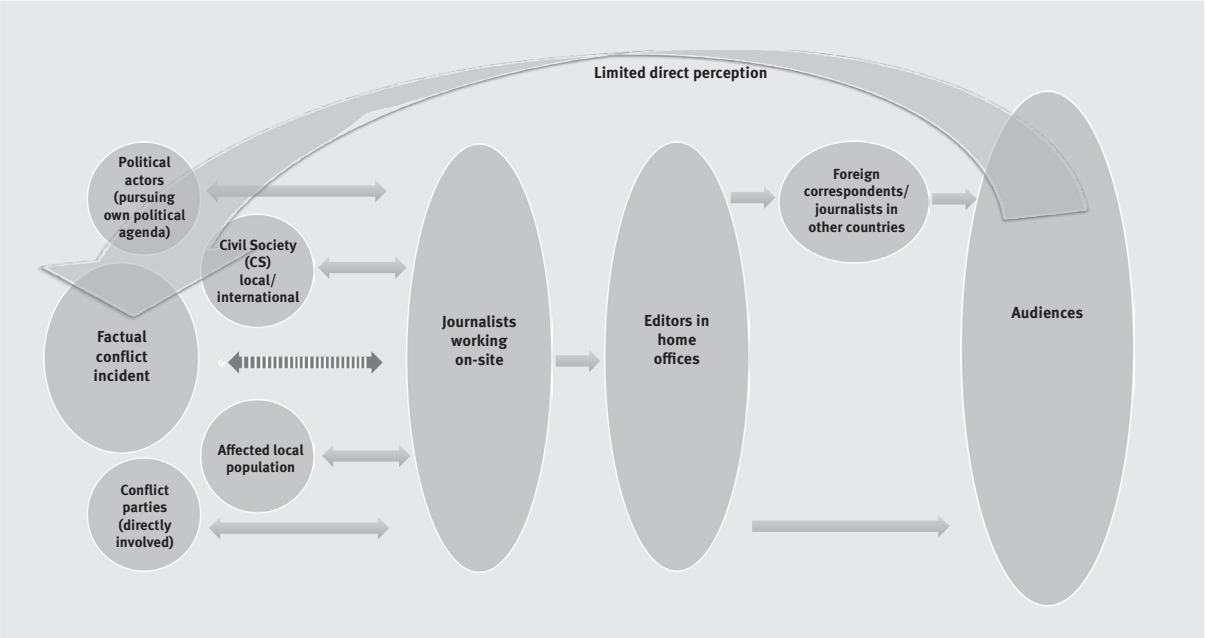

FIGURE 1 - Broken Mirror: How the Media and Journalists Promote Distorted Conflict Perceptions.

Against this backdrop, the work of media and journalists can either foster polarised, one-sided views and discourses or widen perspectives and question the construction of these discourses.[6] As social intermediaries, media practitioners function as a general interface in collective social life. They shape two constitutive elements of every conflict in the long term: the predominant perception of the conflict (and of possible solutions) and interpersonal communication. If nothing more, they can increase the degree of openness to constructive social dialogue.

5 These remarks refer mainly to classical forms of journalism in "traditional" media – newspapers, television and radio. These forms are still essential, particularly in informing political decision-making processes and as a means of substantiating and ensuring the quality of life-saving information. At their current stage of development, more participative forms such as citizen journalism or blogging appear to be interesting possibilities of expression. However, I see them more as complementary sources of information, especially in processes of the social construction of conflict transformation. (For more on the role of (new) social media and information technologies, see *Section Four.)*

6 This ambivalence characterises the work of media companies, publishers and journalists regardless of being governed by a media logic that revolves around ratings and markets rather than by their role in violent conflicts. The constructive reporting of conflicts, however, reflects the criteria ideally fulfilled by quality journalism, which in turn can contribute constructively to peacebuilding.

To achieve this, the journalist must portray events, data and contexts in a way that makes them intelligible and actionable. At the same time, journalism at its best does not simply convey facts but subjects them to critical questioning and analysis.

2.2 The importance of local agency

The task of peacebuilding is what Rama Mani describes as the creation of an "inclusive political and civic community" after far-ranging traumatic events, and it is one of the fundamental prerequisites for the successful and sustainable rebuilding of societies fragmented by violence. "Clearly, an 'inclusive political community' does not mean erasing or evading differences between people. Rather, it means including all people, groups and communities – despite their differences – out of respect for their belonging to the same political and civic community and partaking of the joint project of rebuilding the society together" (Mani 2005, 512).

Involving local actors for peace is a key factor in determining the durability and sustainability of initiatives of conflict transformation. To be successful, peacebuilding – be it induced and/or supported by outsiders, or pursued and implemented from the bottom-up within conflict-ridden communities – must be grounded in, and aware of, the "localised modi vivendi" of dealing with conflict constructively and resiliently (Mac Ginty/Richmond 2013, 769). It must also reinvigorate the previously neglected or suppressed agency of local populations and peacebuilders. Any romantic notion of local engagement would be out of place (ibid., 770), however; it is more a matter of integrating this engagement in the peace process and building on existing constructive conflict transformation mechanisms.[7]

Creators of practical peace can be found across all sectors of society and particularly in those groups that are generally ignored: women, youth, the elderly, local academics *and* the local media. In some cases, local media practitioners possess "a great deal of awareness of the situation and are fighting against great odds" – unlike their international colleagues – despite limited funds.[8] And although it might be rare, given that local media work is just as "embedded in power structures" as the media in general and is driven by a range of motivations, journalistic coverage of local peace processes can reveal the diversity of existing practical possibilities and processes traditionally employed by local actors to mediate conflicts or deal with power imbalances and inequalities.[9]

Nevertheless, one considerable challenge remains: to this day the local population groups affected by conflict remain sidelined in practice, despite the fact that their involvement is rhetorically emphasised in strategic and practical decision-making processes. More attention is often devoted to a top-down approach than to the active involvement of local peace brokers (Futamura/Notaras 2011). Furthermore, in practical peacebuilding there is a tension between local expertise and thematic-technical knowledge that is "part of a broader competition for authority" (Autesserre 2014, 69). Only a combination of these two indispensable competencies results in effective and sustainable peacebuilding. Yet on the ground there is often competition based on "which (and whose) knowledge matters most" (ibid.), with peacebuilding practitioners, donors and policy-makers assigning much greater value to technical knowledge (e.g. specialist knowledge of conflict transformation, project management or agricultural engineering) than to knowledge of local provenance (e.g. in-depth knowledge of local histories, key actors, and social, political and economic dynamics).

To change the latter, much depends on the reporting and validating – also by the media – of local actors for peace with local knowledge. In the following section I consider how media assistance by external actors can substantially support international and local peacebuilding in war-torn societies. I also look at some of the obstacles that remain.

7 For a critical review of assumptions, and a critique of exaggerations and the lack of evidence-based conceptualisation in scholarship on local peacebuilding, see Paffenholz forthcoming.

8 Interview with Rama Mani on 19 November 2012 by phone. Of course, this does not hold true for all local media.

9 Interview with Oliver Richmond on 26 May 2014 by phone.

3 Media Assistance in Processes of Conflict Transformation

Media assistance aims at supporting the development of independent media (including legal frameworks), strengthening ethical standards, providing professional training for journalists and media workers, and supporting journalists in concrete projects (articles, films and radio broadcasts).

Both as a general strategy and an overarching category, media assistance operates via concrete programmes and projects (media interventions). By supporting media and journalists in improving their work, especially in conflict societies, media assistance – if effective and sustainable – becomes a peacebuilding tool.

3.1 The scope of media-related peacebuilding

Media-related peacebuilding – as one among several tools, necessary but not sufficient for peacebuilding – can best unfold its potential effectively and sustainably in synergies with other approaches such as:

- the establishment of educational and cultural institutions
- a restructuring of the economy
- security sector reforms (SSR)
- the disarming and reintegration of formerly opposed combatants (DDR)
- reforms to the justice system
- the reconstruction of infrastructure
- engagement in policymaking for the participation of youth and marginalised groups such as women and Indigenous people
- the therapeutic treatment of collective and individual traumata
- memory work.

A number of practical models and sets of guidelines have now emerged in the area of conflict transformation and peacebuilding that promote an understanding of the point at which media and journalists can be integrated into the process of transforming violent conflict.[10] In these models, conflict trajectories are divided into individual phases, each with particular characteristics, and the constellation of actors is determined in each case in order to identify entry points for media-related peacebuilding projects.

For instance, based upon the "pyramid of local conflict actors" – the conflict analysis tool developed by John Paul Lederach (1997) – Bent Nørby Bonde systematically classifies the addressees of possible media interventions, placing the actors who have political control over media legislation, media structures and media content at the top of the pyramid. These could be, for example, military, religious or political leaders, local leaders, and leaders of opposition and minority groups (see *Figure 2*). The pyramid's middle level consists of directors of public service broadcasting and large private broadcasting services; television and radio directors; newspaper publishers and editors-in-chief; and leading functionaries from regulatory agencies, such as heads of departments in large administrative units who are responsible for the implementation of laws and regulatory measures. At the base of the pyramid, the "grassroots leadership level", Bonde sees the decision-makers in organisations that, for example, promote respect for human rights, freedom of speech and freedom of the press, as well as the directors of journalistic and media associations, ranging from local media to civil society organisations operating in that field. Individuals who are in charge of programming, framing and production should also be added to this level of actors. On the basis of their direct links to the reality of people on the ground, publishers, journalists and producers in larger media enterprises are able to develop programmes that respond to people's needs.

10 For a more detailed discussion see, for example, Howard 2005, 2009; Spurk 2002, 2007; Loewenberg et al. 2007 and Gilboa 2009.

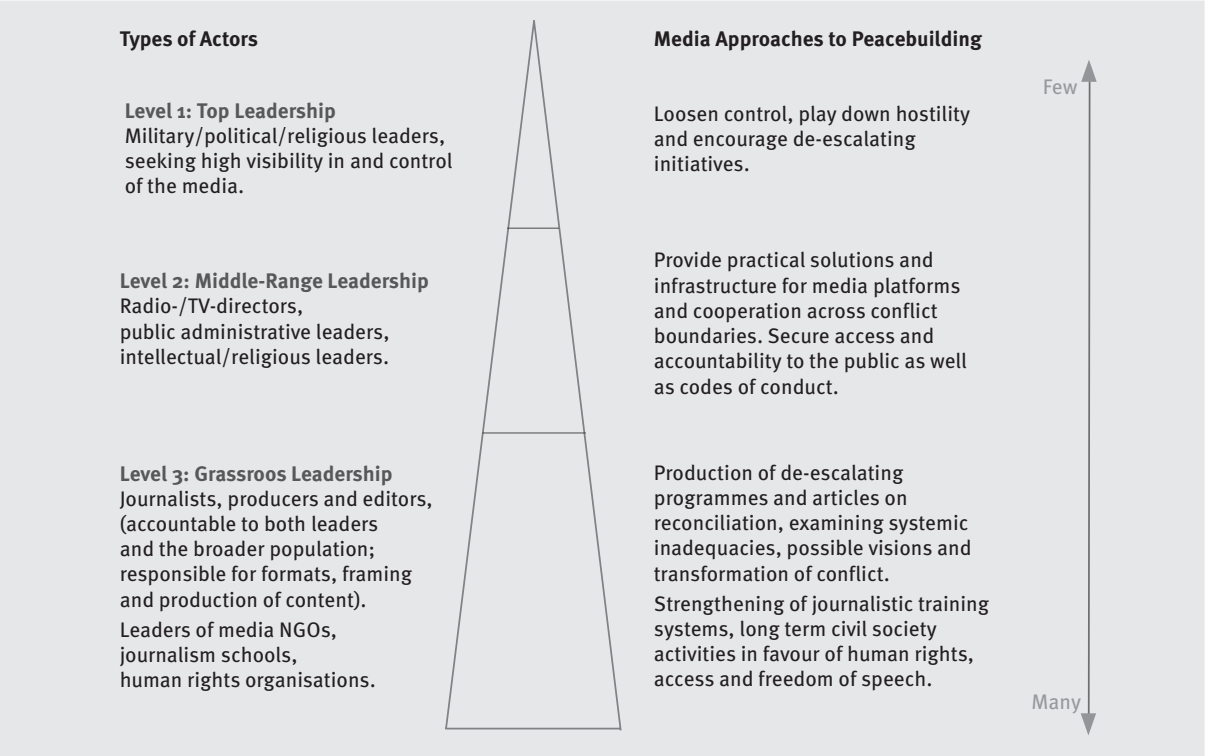

FIGURE 2 - Approaches to Media-Assistance Programmes (Bonde 2007).

Depicting the key determinants that influence how journalists and editors cover conflict, the peace researcher Burkhard Bläsi has developed a comprehensive overview as a model for clarifying the complexity of the situation (Bläsi 2004, 5; see *Figure 3*). However, the influential factors Bläsi identifies rarely appear alone and/or in isolation, but rather as closely intertwined, complex and interdependent problem areas of journalistic praxis. Nevertheless, such an analytical instrument can be helpful, particularly for conceptualising media intervention policies, since it untangles a whole conglomerate of problems and could reveal possible entry points for projects on the ground.

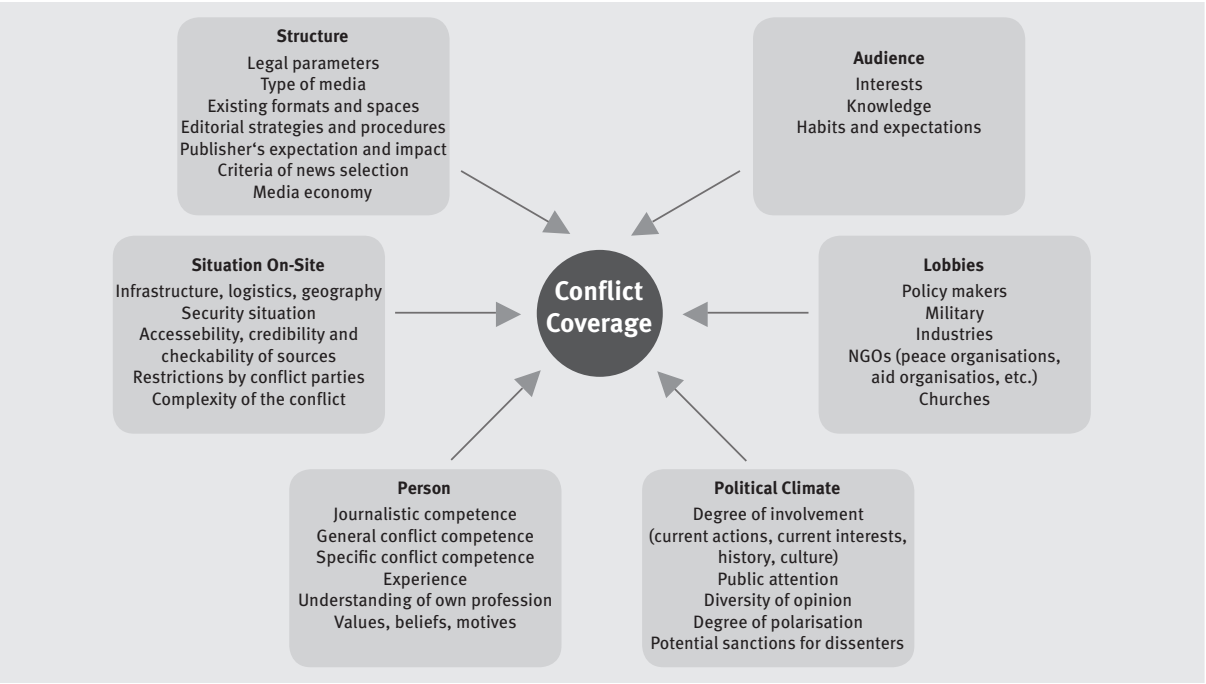

FIGURE 3 – Factors of Influence and Entry Points in Conflict Coverage (Bläsi 2004).

Over the past twenty years a wide range of media interventions have been devised and implemented worldwide to reframe conflicts, build consensus and trust between communities, balance asymmetrical power relationships (Bratic/Shinar 2010) or counter hate speech and the propaganda of violent actors. In the area of conflict prevention, for example, the organisation Internews is endeavouring to develop an early-warning system for preventing mass violence and genocide, drawing on its experience in media monitoring in Myanmar, Kyrgyzstan and Kenya.[11] Its practical application and concrete effects remain to be seen, however.[12] In another example, efforts are being undertaken together with the new Nigerian news broadcaster Arewa24 to offer an alternative to the violent propaganda and recruitment efforts of the militant Islamist group Boko Haram.[13] And in the framework of the continuing peace process in Columbia, against the backdrop of ongoing negotiations taking place in Havana between the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) and the government, media are being supported as they communicate the developments of the peace process and its predominant themes to the local communities they work with, raising awareness of local issues and perspectives within the nation-wide public discourse.[14]

The issues touched upon can be further illustrated by experiences from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

3.2 Democratic Republic of the Congo: A case in point

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) saw two ensuing wars from 1996 to 2003 with the military involvement of up to nine countries, leading to what experts today call a "hidden war" in which the population bears the brunt of the conflict. Between 1998 and 2007 alone, 5.4 million people died of conflict-related causes.

Today millions of people are still deprived of fundamental political, social and cultural rights due to widespread physical, psychological and structural violence. Sexual violence against women, men and children is used as a strategy of warfare. While 6.7 million people live in food insecurity, 2.7 million have been displaced, more than half of them in the North and South Kivu regions of the eastern DRC, according to reports by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).[15] This conflict-driven humanitarian crisis is enmeshed with incompetence, corruption and personal interest, well-documented legacies of a past political culture.

It would be too simplistic to assign sole responsibility for the gross and unabated human rights violations to rampaging militias, rebel groups and corrupt armed forces. Yet correspondents covering the conflict from inside and outside of the country often lack a critical perspective, seemingly content instead to employ a perpetrator-victim dichotomy and thus cement stereotypes.

A more discriminating look at the DRC's conflict landscape reveals that beneath the surface there is a bundle of intertwined conflict causes: disputes over land, customary authority, identity, access to highly profitable resources and local power. Predominantly it is a conflict between military, business and political elites, involving domestic, regional and international players.

These causes of conflict give rise to what could be described as a mutually beneficial relationship between local, regional and national elites on the one hand and emerging armed groups on the other (Stearns 2012, 42). While the elites regard the armed groups¸ of which more than two dozen have emerged

11 Interview with Susan Abbott, former Deputy Director Program Development at Internews, on 12 June 2014 in New York.

12 Among others, BBC Media Action is conducting insightful practice-oriented research in this area. More on ongoing projects and findings can be found at www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction.

13 The development and operations of the broadcaster are being funded to the tune of six million US dollars over the next two years by the US State Department as part of its counterinsurgency efforts. For further information see "Nigerian Television Becomes Front for U.S. in Terrorism Fight" (New York Times, 6 June 2014, p. A1).

14 Set to begin very soon, this project is being developed by Colombian organisations and will be implemented together with International Media Support (IMS).

15 Cf. East Africa: Displaced Population Report, Issue 17, 30 April – 30 September 2014, which can be viewed and downloaded under www.humanitarianresponse.info/operations/eastern-africa/document/eastern-africa-displaced-populations-report-issue-17-1-april-30 (retrieved on 1 Feb 2015). Regarding food insecurity in DRC cf. www.wfp.org/stories/10-facts-about-hunger-democratic-republic-congo (retrieved on 1 Feb 2015).

in the last twenty years, as a useful tool for wielding social control over local populations and safeguarding their own interests, the armed groups take advantage of eroded authority structures at both local and central levels (ibid.).

Peace processes to date have largely been of a top-down nature.[16] However, perceptions can sometimes differ markedly as to what needs to be prioritised so that people in communities can live together non-violently and with mutual understanding, as peace researcher Sara Hellmüller demonstrated in the case of the north-eastern province of Ituri. There she conducted 111 in-depth interviews with local interlocutors, as well as focus groups. While the international community, adopting notions of the liberal peace theory, held to a state-centred strategy of problem-solving focused primarily on state-building through elections, the local interviewees emphasised the importance of mitigating ethnically charged land disputes between Hema and Lendu, which they saw as the root cause of the conflicts. They understood "peace in relational terms" (Helmüller 2013, 222): "In contrast to international actors who saw peace in the reconstruction of the state, the local population considered the promotion of peaceful cohabitation with neighbours and the resolution of land conflicts as the main components of peace" (ibid.).

Eric Malolo of Reseau Haki na Amani (RHA), a network of civil society organisations, explains that the non-inclusion of local assessments in internationally-supported peacebuilding and processes of media assistance still persists: "Local actors work in isolation and their actions are not part of a global peacebuilding process in the DRC. Their recommendations and their work on the ground are not taken into account."[17]

As experts continually emphasise, it is not a case of romanticising local and civil society contributions but actively and meaningfully involving all key actors (Morvan/Kambale Nzwev 2010; International Alert 2012). These include media and journalists, whose work bears fruit in peacebuilding in various ways.

In DRC, these media and journalists work in a bustling environment that, however, is marked by a clear urban-rural divide. "Today, the DRC tops the African charts in the number of registered media outlets, be they print media, radio or television. [...] Despite this diverse media landscape, citizens in the provinces are often deprived of access to information, as the media are mostly concentrated in the capital city, Kinshasa" (Frère 2011, 6). The medium of television, which now boasts 200 channels, is chiefly an urban phenomenon, due at least in part to the lack of an adequate power supply in many other areas and the localisation of many outlets in the larger towns (ibid., 12).[18] Of the 638 newspapers that appeared officially in 2008, only 228 could be bought on the retail market, and even these appeared irregularly. There were no daily newspapers outside of Kinshasa. As for radio, there were 20 radio stations in the DRC in 1996. That number has since increased more than 20-fold to 450. Radio is hence the most widespread medium in the Congo.[19] "Except for Kinshasa where almost forty stations are available, most local audiences only have access to very few stations, as radios broadcast on limited wavelength with a range of fifty and one hundred kilometres" (Frère 2013, 162).

Media-related peacebuilding in practice

Despite their reputation as being often politically co-opted and conflict-exacerbating, local journalists can play a constructive role, as could be observed during armed skirmishes between community-based Mai Mai militias and state military forces in Butembo in North Kivu.[20] There it was local media who, through good-quality conflict coverage, informed the local people about the situation, letting them know when they could safely leave their houses or when they should stay inside to avoid being caught in the crossfire.

16 "DRC Peacebuilding Ignores Local Solutions" (Inter Press Service News Agency, 13 September 2013). Available at www.ipsnews.net/2013/09/drc-peacebuilding-ignores-local-solutions/ (retrieved on 29 April 2015). It would have been possible to augment the process with bottom-up elements and mechanisms of local conflict transformation, making political actions more sustainable and relevant to the peacebuilders, and above all to the local population (Autesserre 2010, 184). This failed due to the "deeply entrenched cultural norms and organizational interest" of many international peacebuilders (ibid., 229).

17 Interview with Eric Malolo on 17 September 2013 by mail.

18 Of the 82 television channels registered in 2008, 51 were in the capital. More recent statistics on the urban-rural spread of the media were not available at the time of publication.

19 Interview with Marie-Soleil Frère on 7 August 2014 by mail.

20 Interview with Eric Malolo on 17 September 2013 by mail.

There are indeed many examples of "some Congolese media [giving] voice to people who were not heard before – mainly at the local level".[21] International media-related peacebuilding efforts helped strengthen these local voices and the work of local media in general, as Radio Okapi exemplifies.

Box 1: Amplifying local voices in a centralised media landscape

In its support of the peace process that followed the Lusaka Ceasefire Agreement of July 1999, the international community's focus included work with media and journalists, in awareness of their important role in conflict countries. In 2002, the United Nations Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC, in 2010 renamed MONUSCO) set up a UN radio station, Radio Okapi. This step heralded a change in previous operational structures in that the UN worked with a civil society actor with the necessary expertise. The Swiss Foundation Hirondelle (FH) joined MONUSCO in establishing and managing the radio station, responsibilities that would previously have been entrusted exclusively to the UN and its personnel. As an NGO, FH was capable of reacting flexibly, thus providing an important counterweight to the heavy bureaucracy of the UN (Betz/Papper 2015).

In the framework of the peace process, Radio Okapi's work has been opening spaces for dialogue since 2002, enabling people from parts of the country occupied at different times by various armed groups to reconnect. Today the station continues to provide this bridge of communication in French as well as in four other national languages (Lingala, Kikongo, Tshiluba and Kiswahili).

"Radio has done a remarkable job in restoring the Congolese social fabric nationwide, enabling the habitants of the different areas to share their views again after years of alienation" (Frère 2013, 162).

Through programmes such as "Parole aux auditeurs" ("A word to the listeners") and "Dialogue entre congolais" ("Dialogue between Congolese") the radio station involves listeners interactively in the debate on current sociocultural and political topics, says François Mbumba of the Institut Panos Grands Lacs.[22] So successful have these programmes been that other Congolese radio stations copy them. The programmes serve as concrete examples of how the population can be involved in discussions relevant to peacebuilding by means of media coverage.[23]

With this kind of journalistic endeavour, Radio Okapi is in line with current trends and fulfils the qualitative expectations of the population, as a recent survey (2011-12) undertaken in the Great Lakes region demonstrates. In Burundi, the DRC and Rwanda, 1300 listeners were asked to name the criteria according to which they would assess the work of journalists as good and credible. Along with fearlessness in the face of attempts at political influence, and the critical questioning of official interpretations of events, listeners repeatedly named the ability to "let people with different opinions express themselves" as the most important sign of quality, one that raised their esteem for the journalists (Frère 2014, 91).

In terms of providing information, Radio Okapi is the only true public service broadcaster, Frère explains, covering most of the territory (80 percent; 56 cities and towns). It employs more than 120 correspondents in the Congo and covers all provinces.

Radio Okapi cooperates with 68 local radio stations that rebroadcast its newscasts. "This partnership gives much credibility to local radio stations and is helping them to improve".[24] Radio Okapi's broad cooperation with local media also enables most of the 250 ethnic groups that make up the Congo to access its news and information.

21 Interview with Marie-Soleil Frère on 7 August 2014 by mail.
22 Interview with François Mbumba on 10 August 2014 by mail. The subjects and content of the radio programmes can be viewed at http://radiookapi.net.
23 The website of Radio Okapi is also the site most frequently consulted for information on current events in the country, with 1.5 million visitors per month.
24 Interview with Marie-Soleil Frère on 7 August 2014 by mail.

Local–international (inter)dependency

Radio Okapi could not generate the necessary funds without international assistance. Its annual budget of US$8.5 million (in 2008 it was $13 million) is still ten times higher than that of the highest-earning private media company in the DRC (Frère 2011, 16).[25] The working conditions are very good in comparison to other media outlets, enabling high-quality journalism, and Radio Okapi pays monthly salaries of 800-1500 US dollars. Having said that, the everyday work of broadcasting at Okapi can involve a delicate balancing act between strategic communication and journalistic praxis, since the employees are not permitted to report critically about the work of MONUSCO. Differing perceptions of the task of Radio Okapi, of its aims and obligations, lead to internal tensions between FH and the decision-makers within the UN mission, i.e. between the two organisations operating the station. Added to these tensions is the lack of an exit strategy, leaving unanswered the question of the station's continued existence, with its high maintenance costs, after the expiry of MONUSCO's mandate.

Wherever UN radios such as Radio Okapi are the means of choice for making peacebuilding processes more inclusive and, hence, more sustainable, they must be participatory from the planning stage onward, and they should be designed so as to be integrated into the existing socio-economic fabric. This is because radio stations can also lead to an undermining of local media in conflict countries. Higher pay and greater access to journalistic resources can result in a brain drain in local media outlets. By paying higher wages, UN radios can unintentionally attract competent journalists away from these local outlets, where these have been practicing good journalism in and for their communities (Betz/Papper 2015). The journalists frequently take their listeners with them, and once the UN mandate has expired they find work as correspondents for better-paying international media.

Structurally, local media operate under very difficult conditions; for example, it would be prohibitive for some to purchase a generator in order to be able to continue broadcasting in places where the power supply is constantly unreliable. They are also faced with the challenge of covering production costs and paying their staff with advertising revenue, especially when based in poor urban and rural regions, where the lack of buying power of the population and the predominantly small size of local businesses preclude the placement of advertising.

Despite the challenges there have been some improvements in media services and information dissemination at local level, Mbumba says. Community radios in the DRC have been professionalising, with fewer mistakes and violations of ethics than in the past. However, "the main change is technical, with many media now broadcasting on the web".[26]

Good quality, critical and inclusive journalism costs money. It demands investment in infrastructure, professional development in journalism, training in specific fields, in-depth research (which means paid time), and fair wages in order to combat external pressure and render bribery attempts unattractive. Though they are the ones most in need of credible and reliable information, the marginalised and impoverished populations of small communities, especially in rural areas – key players in sustainable peacebuilding and the bearers of a new order of peace – do not have the means to fund these investments. In regions of conflict this is even less the case. Those media which still focus on local populations in their work can often only do this because they are drip-fed by international organisations and donors or work in a (sometimes) uneasy partnership in order to be able to better access international funding opportunities (Frère 2013, 176). Sometimes they are paid directly or paid a fee for the broadcasting or printing of ready-made programmes devoted to peacebuilding; international NGO Search for Common Ground (SFCG) and the Dutch organisation La Benvolencija, for example, operate in this way. These technically very polished, specialised programmes are important sources of additional income for some local media, especially in remote areas; they help to overcome shortages of broadcast material and fill blank pages in the newspapers.

25 The figures given for the budget vary; Michelle Betz and Helene Papper cite Radio Okapi's annual budget as 10 million US dollars (Betz/Papper 2015).

26 Interview with François Mbumba on 10 August 2014 by mail.

"But these ready-made programmes are also criticised by radio managers who think that it would be more appropriate to help the radio stations to improve their own programmes than to buy airtime to broadcast programmes that have been elaborated out of the Congolese media newsrooms".[27]

Box 2: Striving for local independence

In the region of Bukavu, where the war spawned a high concentration of media-support projects, Maendeleo, a community radio practicing highly participative journalism, was being offered so much ready-made paid content by international organisations that the director recently refused to take on more SFCG programmes than Maendeleo was already broadcasting. Maendeleo argued that the international programmes were taking up so much airtime that there was hardly any left for their own coverage.[28]

Established in 1993, the radio station made a name for itself during the wars by resisting the influence of armed combatants in its news coverage and concentrating its efforts on the local listeners. The listeners are involved interactively by means of 110 radio clubs, through which they can themselves introduce topics to the station's coverage.

The nature and implementation of international media assistance over the past two decades have not brought the smaller and larger media organisations across the DRC together in one strong and self-reliant media sector, as Chouchou Namegabe, President of the Association of Media Women in South Kivu (AFEM-SK) explains (quoted in Frère 2011, 65). On the contrary: support was often provided to individual initiatives, separating local media outlets rather than bringing them together. "These initiatives have certainly encouraged pluralism, but they have arguably not encouraged quality journalism and have instead favoured models that support the scattering of media outlets rather than the convergence of a strong, self-sufficient media sector" (ibid.).

In recent times there have been advancements in the local media landscape in the DRC as local media attempt to secure qualitative media coverage for local populations, despite economic pressures and serious structural shortcomings, by pooling resources and skills to create "media synergies". During the elections of 2006, the editorial offices of radio stations in various towns worked jointly, sending journalists together into the regions to report, building editorial teams, sharing information and then broadcasting all at the same time. Not only did this strategy impact positively on the quality of electoral coverage, but it also had a harmonising effect on all of the cooperating radio stations, so that instead of competing as they usually did, they were able to learn from one another (Frère 2013, 171).

What is particularly interesting about this example is that listeners were motivated to tune into local radio programmes instead of Radio Okapi, which they otherwise frequently listened to. The local radios provided detailed local news, in contrast to the more generalised coverage offered by Radio Okapi. For the first time, local radio stations were able to position themselves with their listeners as independent and relevant sources of information (ibid.).

In sum, we can conclude that although the DRC's peacebuilding environment in general has not proved to be particularly inclusive and has largely ignored local actors, media-related peacebuilding activities have managed to strengthen bottom-up elements by involving local voices – the skills, experiences and needs of local people. It is an approach to peacebuilding that has emerged only over time from joint learning processes, revealing itself to be a practical response to challenges on the ground – an approach, however, that still provides much room for improvement.

In the next section, I will explore whether new information and communication technologies could offer such improvements and in which areas they are already being employed.

27 Interview with Marie-Soleil Frère on 7 August 2014 by mail.
28 Interview with Marie-Soleil Frère on 7 August 2014 by mail.

4 Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for Peace: Much Ado about Nothing?

New technologies and social media have found their way into concrete peacebuilding practices. However, "[these initiatives] are not ICT-projects; they are peacebuilding projects that we enhance with ICTs. It is important to think about it that way, because too often people get excited about the technology, since it is the 'new thing'. Peacebuilding is old and it is dealing with an old problem".[29]

ICTs as peacebuilding-enhancing tools

In the run-up to dialogue and mediation processes, social media platforms can be used as a filter to glean the issues that are most pressing in a broadly representative way, ensuring that they are as grounded as possible in the everyday life of local communities and endorsed by as many voices as possible as being the appropriate subjects for negotiation (see *Figure 4*). This process helps to prevent negotiations from overlooking or bypassing issues that are relevant to the transformation of the given conflict.

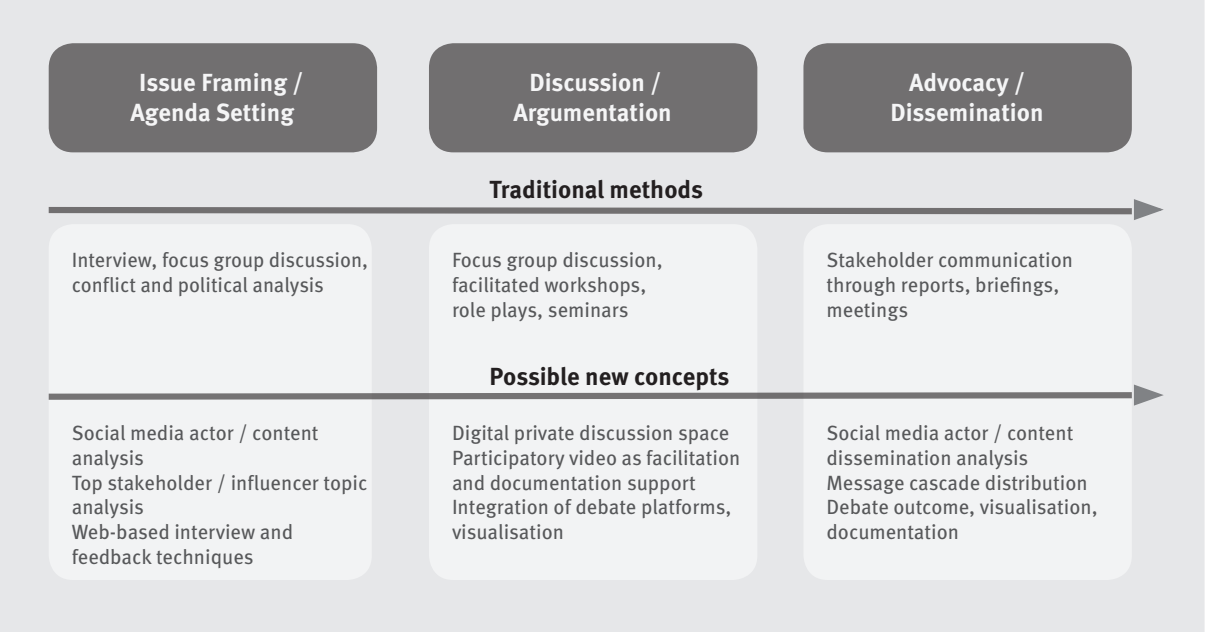

FIGURE 4 – The Conflict Resolution Process: How can social media platforms contribute to constructive or consensus-building argumentation? (Adapted from Wievelsiep 2014; communication with the author).

For example, "digital alternative informants" can be identified with the help of Twitter, in combination with the analytical tool Topsi, wherever dialogue processes are to be strengthened. Using Topsi it is possible to examine communication streams on Twitter, including those in conflict countries, to determine which tweets are read closely and sent on to others (re-tweeted). The high number of followers attracted by a particular voice, and the frequency with which its messages are re-tweeted, reveals that this voice carries more weight than others, explains Matthias Wevelsiep, who participated recently in a research project

29 Interview with Helena Puig in New York on 30 April 2014.

conducted by the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) on digital space and conflict management.[30] In this way, Wievelsiep says, actors can be identified who have previously been overlooked and who can then be involved as additional key actors in dialogue and mediation processes.

Box 3: Old and new media in Sudan's Blue Nile State

Through well-designed and well-implemented ICT-enhanced peacebuilding activities, affected communities can begin to see their local environment with new eyes and discover previously unknown aspects of it. Take, for example, a project in Sudan's Blue Nile State. Conflicts were occurring between sedentary farmers and (nomadic) pastoralists originally from Sudan and the Sahel region, who were all using lands along the same migratory routes. In order to sustainably prevent these conflicts, the *Participatory Digital Mapping Project* was developed.[31] It emerged that a lack of information and its poor quality were among the key causes of the conflict. The local population depends on information that allows them to choose the right time for the migration and define the availability of water along the route. They access this information through community leaders, as well as cell phones and local radios. However, the local communities themselves had few opportunities to contribute to and thus improve the otherwise rather unreliable and fragmented supply of information. This changed with the project, for "suddenly these isolated villages are hearing about each other and so everything changes".[32]

In order to bring together a broad range of local voices and experiences of the situation in the region and use these for the digital participatory map, information was analysed that had been sent in brief text messages by members of the public and pre-identified trusted informants. Traditional media were also used: every two weeks, feedback on the situation was collected via calls from listeners to a local radio programme, accompanied by outreach meetings conducted by the Sudanese Development Association (SUDIA). While it was primarily young men who knew how to use a mobile phone, only the elders had the authority in the communities to pass on information. As a way of overcoming this power discrepancy, they were paired up in teams.[33] In this way it was possible to feed in information from their communities. Of particular relevance is that the project in Blue Nile State was aimed at the empowerment of local peacebuilding. Previously, not only were local voices ignored in attempts to maintain an adequate and up-to-date overview of the situation in the region; even the many local initiatives that had been formed to strengthen understanding and community life among the farmers and pastoralists were hardly noticed. The project aimed to heighten their visibility in order to support a "discourse of peace" and establish a "locally owned early-response mechanism" (Puig 2013, 80).

Technological hardware by no means lags behind social media in terms of its usefulness in peacebuilding. In a study on digital technology and peace, Steven Livingston highlighted the variety of ways in which these instruments have become part of existing peacebuilding practices and can serve to promote accountability – in other words, how their functionality can be harnessed to detect crime and human rights violations in conflict countries and call to account those responsible.

Remote sensing satellite imagery, for instance, can be used to detect, observe and analyse the smallest objects from outer space (Livingston 2015).

30 Interview with Matthias Wevelsiep on 17 April 2014 by Skype. He was project leader of the project exploring use of the digital space for conflict transformation. The project was funded by the Berghof Foundation in 2012/13, within its grantmaking focus on "Virtual Spaces for Conflict Transformation".

31 For more information on this project, which was implemented by SUDIA and funded by USIP, see Puig 2013, 79.

32 Interview with Helena Puig in New York on 30 April 2014.

33 The extent to which the project involved working with women in particular in order to make it more inclusive could not be determined at the time this article was submitted.

Box 4: Tracking human rights violations with new technologies

Today the same technology is applied to the area of human rights protection and the responsiblity to protect (R2P), for instance, in documenting flows of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs), in order to prove human rights violations such as the torching of villages, looting, and the destruction of infrastructure (Livingston 2015), as well as identifying previously unknown mass graves or confirming their existence. (Illegally) armed actors and their activities are monitored with the help of satellites, in order to improve early warning systems for affected areas and communities. For example, since December 2010 the Satellite Sentinel Project (SSP) has been regularly monitoring the trajectory of the conflict between the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan from a height of 300 kilometres so as to be able to table evidence, collected in near real-time, of alleged atrocities and human rights violations – including those reported by refugees fleeing such situations, thus allowing verification of their accounts.[34] The aim of the initiative is to prevent a return to full-scale civil war by informing the world early about what is happening. To achieve this, SSP collaborates with the civil society organisation Enough Project, which focuses on genocide and crimes against humanity, and the DigitalGlobe, a company producing commercial satellite information systems. Along with satellite imagery and data pattern analysis, interviews and research are conducted on the ground (ground sourcing), in order to keep track of unfolding developments within the conflict landscape of the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan. In 2011, working together with the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and on the basis of eye witnesses, SSP drew attention to some dig sites that indicated the presence of mass graves close to the town of Kadugli in the South Sudanese state of Kordofan. Though they were generally treated with caution, these satellite-assisted finds provoked marked political reactions.[35]

The examples show that new technologies and ICTs can indeed be useful as peacebuilding-enhancing tools if employed correctly. Nevertheless, critical considerations need to be taken into account when using ICTs in peacebuilding, whether in the digital sphere or as hardware in the field.

Limits of ICTs

Worldwide, 1.3 billion people have no access to electricity. Most of them are in developing countries.[36] There the number of internet users has almost doubled since 2009, yet at the same time 90 percent of the approximately four billion non-users are to be found in this group of countries (ITU 2014). Forty-four percent of households worldwide have an internet connection, though there are big differences between them. Only 31 percent of these are to be found in developing countries, while the remaining households are in the so-called "developed" world (ibid.). In order to send large data packages quickly through the internet or watch videos online and upload them without interruption, and to use social media applications smoothly, users need a resilient and strong internet connection (broadband). Yet the "mobile broadband penetration" – the total number of users with access to mobile broadband – is only 21 percent in developing countries, compared to almost 80 percent in "developed" countries.[37]

In poorer regions and conflict countries the digital divide is particularly deep. This can be said not only of the divide between the global north and the global south, but also within countries themselves. The majority of internet users worldwide can typically be described as "male, young and urban". The digital divide is compounded by the problem of illiteracy and a lack of media literacy.[38] New technologies and

34 See SSP's website at www.satsentinel.org.

35 See, for instance, BBC article "Sudan's South Kordofan fighting: 'Mass graves found'" (BBC, 14 July 2012) and Reuters, "Sudan says no proof of mass graves in conflict area" (Reuters, 24 August 2012).

36 "Let There Be Light, Implores U.N. Chief" (Inter Press Service News Agency, 2 June 2014). Available at www.ipsnews.net/2014/06/let-there-be-light-implores-u-n-chief/ (retrieved on 29 April 2015)

37 On its website the ITU provides an overview of the most recent statistics in "The World in 2014: ICT Facts and Figures": www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx (retrieved on 21 September 2014).

38 CIMA defines this term as follows: "'media literacy' refers to a person's ability to understand, analyze, and utilize the media, as well as their ability to differentiate between quality, unbiased news and opinion (...). Improving the level of a society's understanding of the media increases the demand for quality news over sensational reporting or 'infotainment'". Further information and reports

social media can hardly be used as empowerment tools when those who could potentially benefit from them can neither read nor write. Moreover, functional know-how and practical experience are necessary in order to make use of a variety of media and the possibilities they offer. Both need to be taken into account in conflict countries over and above the challenges of infrastructure.

The use of mobile phones is certainly spreading, but this fact alone reveals nothing about possibilities for their utilisation, nor who holds the devices.[39] Of particular interest when it comes to peacebuilding is the fact that technology can change conflict dynamics.[40] This can go either way. A digital network that was created to enable people living in the conflict region to exchange information quickly and adequately about the conflict can also be utilised to spread rumours rapidly across the region, penetrating far into the affected communities. ICT-based communication systems operating on the basis of erroneous assumptions can be misused to more efficiently organise and coordinate violence rather than to strengthen peace-enhancing communication. That is why a solid Do No Harm assessment is needed, as it is in every good peacebuilding initiative, in order to assess the ways in which the planned approach will influence the conflict dynamics (Anderson 1999, 2004). It is a case of finding out how potential negative outcomes can be mitigated and positive outcomes promoted.

In sum, ICTs and social media have diverse implications that can either support or obstruct peacebuilding. In peacebuilding, the potential of ICTs for empowerment is "not inherent but instead depends on the dynamics of power as they are expressed in (and during) the politics of peacebuilding", (Tellidis/Kappler 2013, 3). Together with social media, ICTs can open up new channels for the active participation of those previously left out, but they do not prevent exclusion and discrimination per se. With a reminder that the legitimacy of peacebuilding has to be continuously constructed and reconstructed, Ioannis Tellidis and Stefanie Kappler point out that ICTs and social media are strung in constant tension between disempowerment, marginalisation and empowerment.

Moreover, training measures that accompany the implementation of ICTs too often target only those involved in the construction, collection, management and dissemination of information, be they local authorities, employees of NGOs, journalists, activists or others. It is imperative that at the same time, capacity-building measures be undertaken with community members and other groups to foster strong and discerning media literacy among the recipients of information. In the end it is the listeners, viewers, readers and internet users in local communities and marginalised urban areas that have to be able to utilise media-constructed information for themselves and to assess its content. So equipped, they can call to account those responsible for disinforming them, and they can harness technological innovations and social media platforms for broadening the menu of mediatised information, as well as critically reflecting on their own behaviour as consumers of media.

5 Conclusion

Communication and perceptions are constitutive for every kind of human interaction and it is essential to work with these elements in the constructive transformation of violent conflict. For this reason peacebuilding must prove itself to be not only media-savvy; it must also strengthen the existing constructive potential of media and journalistic endeavour in order to be successful and sustainable. In other words, peacebuilding will benefit from a media-related component.

on this subject can be found at http://cima.ned.org/media-development/media-literacy (retrieved on 25 September 2014).

39 Almost as many mobile phone contracts have so far been signed worldwide as there are people (approximately seven billion). More than half of these (3.6 billion) have been in the Asia-Pacific region, according to the ITU. "In developing countries, mobile-cellular penetration will reach 90 percent by end 2014, compared with 121 percent in developed countries" (ITU 2014).

40 Interview with Helena Puig in New York on 30 April 2014.

Nevertheless, collaborating with media and journalists so that their work – done in compliance with quality standards of professional journalism – can make a constructive contribution to conflict transformation processes is just one building-block in a larger and more complex theory of change. For this reason it is crucial to avoid looking in isolation at the way in which media-related peacebuilding interventions influence processes of conflict transformation. It is much more important to ask whether appropriate linkages have been built with other efforts that reinforce and multiply impact. Hal Culbertson points out that "peacebuilders cannot deliver peace on their own", and one could add that neither can media and journalists: "However, they can deliver outcomes that help move peace processes or efforts forward if their initatives are linked with others" (Culbertson 2010, 83).

Together, pracitioners and academics should work to enhance the as yet poor evidence base using a variety of means and methods in order to better understand these linkages in detail. Practitioners and theoreticians in the fields of peacebuilding and media development must cooperate much more closely and intentionally seek to interrelate. Whether media development initiatives are discrete projects or part of broader development programmes, the causal link demonstrating how they contribute tangibly to peacebuilding, even enabling peacebuilding in the first place or helping to transform violent disputes, armed conflicts and (civil) wars constructively and sustainably, has yet to be empirically underpinned.

In this context, peace and conflict researchers have to date been rather underrepresented, more often than not leaving the reflection on successful intervention to media researchers or journalists and war reporters. Critical peace and conflict research should become much more active. On the basis of probing conceptual reflection carried out within their own field, researchers first need to identify where the work of media and journalists is making constructive contributions, sustainably strengthening bottom-up elements and mechanisms of local conflict transformation. Secondly, peace and conflict research should help to define clearly what can be considered as a "successful" contribution of media and journalists to peacebuilding processes, beyond all inflated expectations of their impact. The key criterion of successful engagement, in my view, is whether or not the "end-users" deem the achieved changes to be valuable and constructive in terms of the conflict culture of their everyday environment. This criterion is the veritable touchstone of involvement with local communities. Thirdly, peace and conflict research needs to help define how or why under particular circumstances such contributions should be initiated or strengthened.

Donors and policy-makers – who often view the work of media and journalists simply as a political-strategic instrument of communication – should consider more open-ended processes of reflection. As an indispensable precondition of effectiveness and sustainability, local and international media and journalists must be treated as equals in this process. The aim should be to strengthen a shared learning-oriented culture in which any issues that arise, along with mistakes and the failure of particular measures to demonstrate impact, are seen to be just as valuable and instructive as the successes – a culture in which these are not immediately sanctioned by donors and policy-makers, for example through negative responses to project-holders applying for funding. Particular attention should also be paid to potential structures of dependency between international and local media or implementers of media-related peacebuilding; wherever they arise, they must be met with targeted counter-strategies.

Although the work of media and journalists is indispensable to peacebuilding, its influence is relative. Thus it should be considered as just one of many instruments in the orchestra of practice-oriented peacebuilding. However, it can create important synergies with activities undertaken in other areas (i.e. peace operations, DDR, transitional justice, etc.) in order to strengthen or, in some cases, build peace-sustaining structures in conflict-ridden societies from the bottom up.

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